POPULAR POLITICAL DOCUMENTARIES:

CASE STUDIES OF MAGNETIC MEDIA

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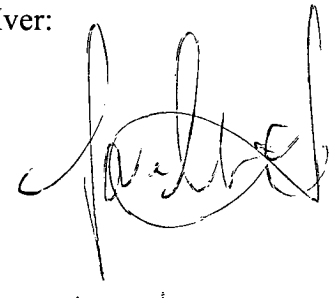

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ABSTRACT

The last decade has witnessed an astonishing increase in the popularity and profitability of documentary film. Nine of the top ten grossing documentaries ever have been made since 2002 and a common feature across many of them is their distinct political focus. These films, which include the likes of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Super Size Me* and *An Inconvenient Truth*, offer a provocative blend of entertainment and political advocacy while also achieving unprecedented levels of commercial success. This thesis investigates how these *popular political documentaries* contribute to public knowledge.

Utilising methods drawn from textual analysis and media sociology, this research is structured around three case studies focusing on the films listed above. It analyses the production of these films, their textual qualities, and the way they interact with other media, particularly the Australian press. Such an approach brings both a trans-media and trans-national perspective to these films which is sensitive to the increasingly chaotic and convergent media environment we now experience (Jenkins 2006; McNair 2006).

The findings of this research suggest that the contribution popular political documentaries make to public knowledge is defined not so much by what the films themselves contain, but by the type of discussion and debate they trigger within the broader media environment. The commercial success of these films and the way they interact with other media encourages new ways of thinking about the relationships

between popular culture and political culture, between audiences and media, and between different media forms. In this thesis, the term *magnetic media* is introduced to describe the complex and ambivalent ways that these films have come to occupy prominent and influential positions within our culture.

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INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2006, the Village Cinemas complex in Hobart, Tasmania, began screening the climate change documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006). The cinema, belonging to one of Australia's largest cinema chains, promoted the film prominently on its website alongside its feature films of the time, including *Garfield 2*, *Material Girls* and *Snakes on a Plane*. Local newspapers carried daily advertisements for the film including session times, pictures of billowing smoke stacks and the tag line "the most terrifying film you will ever see."[1]

The film went on to gross over $AUD4 million, becoming the fourth highest grossing documentary in Australia ever. This was part of a global intake estimated at close to $US50 million.[2] In the days and weeks that followed, the 'star' of the film, Al Gore, adorned the covers of popular magazines and was interviewed live on Australian television, while politicians, pundits and environmental groups talked publicly about the film across diverse sections of the nation's media.

In the year following *An Inconvenient Truth*'s release, climate change became a major national issue in Australia in the lead-up to the federal election of November 2007. The result of the poll was a landmark victory for the Australian Labor Party which, in reclaiming government after twelve years in Opposition, had used climate change as a key policy platform. In the days following the victory, the newly elected Prime

[1] See for example *The Mercury* (15.09.06), p.46
[2] According to figures sourced from Screen Australia (2008) and Box Office Mojo (2010)

Minister, Kevin Rudd, received a congratulatory phone call from Al Gore with the two reportedly discussing how the Australian government could help combat climate change. Rudd declared that he would resume these discussions with Gore at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Bali, held in December of that year (McMahon 2007).

This potted account of the events surrounding the Australian release of *An Inconvenient Truth* points to the emergence of a new and relatively under-researched category of film – the *popular political documentary*. These films, which include *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), *Super Size Me* (2004), *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and, to a lesser extent, *Food Inc.* (2008), *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005), *Control Room* (2004) and *The Corporation* (2003)[3] represent some of the most profitable, most watched and most *visible* documentaries ever.

Previous studies of these films have approached them from a number of different vantage points. Some have paid close attention to their content, focusing on their rhetoric, their humour and other stylistic features (see Frentz & Rosteck 2009; Johnson 2009; Porton 2004; Rizzo 2005). Others have sought to measure their public impact, looking at their influence on individual audience members (Cottone & Byrd-Bredbenner 2007; Koopman et al. 2006; Stroud 2007), or evaluating their place within documentary history or recent political history (McEnteer 2006; Toplin 2006).

Common to all the studies listed above is a concern with how these films contribute to public knowledge – understood here as that shared realm of information, ideas,

identities, beliefs and ways of understanding that circulate within a given public.[4] While rarely expressed in such language, all these studies evaluate the content and character of these films and how they contribute to this shared realm. On another level, these studies seek to understand how these films function, what influence they have and how they were used and interpreted by audiences. Across many of these studies, there is a sense that these films are historically significant, and there is also the suggestion that analysing these films can yield important insights into the nature of politics, popular culture and media today.

This thesis shares the same concerns as the studies above, but it approaches these films a little differently. Firstly, this research recognises that popular political documentaries have a reach and influence that extends beyond American shores. The research on these films to-date has almost exclusively been focused on and within the United States (see Johnson 2009; Toplin 2006). While this is understandable given the films' American origins, there is an opportunity here to incorporate other cultural contexts and thus explore how these films were integrated into broader, trans-national media flows. Much of the box office takings for these films came from outside the United States while numerous media reports point to high-levels of interest in these films across various national contexts (see Box Office Mojo 2010; Gant 2007; Smaill 2006).

Secondly, as indicated in the anecdote that opened this chapter, this research is not solely concerned with what the films themselves are about; it is also interested in the broader cultural contexts of their production and reception. Popular political

[4] Public knowledge is written about in various ways within media studies. This understanding is inspired, in part, by Sshudson (1995) and Corner (2000) although it differs from both.

documentaries established a presence across a diverse range of media. *An Inconvenient Truth* was not only seen in cinemas, it was released on DVD, it had an accompanying book, website and soundtrack while also being the subject of countless previews, reviews, interviews and news. These films are part of a media environment in which texts can travel and co-exist across multiple media spaces (see Jenkins 2006). Therefore, a key concern of this research will be to examine the way popular political documentaries interact with other media. Once again, this is a feature of these films which has been paid scant attention within the literature (notwithstanding some studies which refer to the responses of reviewers, e.g. Frentz & Rosteck 2009; Toplin 2006).

Thirdly, this research argues that we can better understand these films by considering them within the context of a rapidly changing media environment. As Peter Dahlgren argues, "the media today are in a profoundly turbulent period," (2009: 35) marked by complex and often contradictory trends associated with new technologies, market pressures and changing audience behaviours. These changes, which will be discussed further in the following chapters, have re-configured the relationship between the media and our broader social world (see McNair 2006). This, in turn, demands a change in how we study the media. As Kevin Williams argues, these media transformations are "further changing the 'old certainties' of what we understand by the media and mass communication" (2003: 1). This does not mean that we simply discard established concepts and theories, but there is a need to acknowledge the divergent trends shaping the contemporary scene. In this thesis the ideas of "cultural chaos" and "convergence culture", developed by Brian McNair (2003a; 2006) and

Henry Jenkins (2006) respectively will provide a theoretical framework that is responsive to this 'turbulent' media landscape.

In light of the above, this thesis adopts a trans-national and trans-media approach to studying these films that considers them within a context of widespread media change. More specifically, it will look at how these films were received and interpreted in Australia, focusing particularly on the way they were covered by the Australian press. Aside from the issues cited above, this research responds to one of the most striking features of these films – their *visibility*. As will be argued throughout this thesis, the visibility of these films was generated by their capacity to engage and interact with other media. These twin concepts of visibility and interaction are worth examining in some more detail here.

VISIBILITY AND INTERACTION

Popular political documentaries captured unprecedented attention from the movie-going public and other media, where their presence was extended across multiple media platforms. It is this visibility, more than any other trait, which makes these films unique within documentary history.[5] It is a trait which has commercial, political and cultural ramifications. According to John B. Thompson (2005), visibility has become a key index of cultural and political power within contemporary society. He argues that:

> mediated visibility is not just a vehicle through which aspects of social and political life are brought to the attention of others: it has become a principal means by which social and political struggles are articulated and carried out. (2005: 49)

[5] See Chapter One for a discussion on the historical context for these films.

The ability to become visible therefore becomes an act of power. This, in turn, references the media's power to make things - ideas, interests and people – visible. These fundamental ideas drive a diverse range of cultural activity: from political demonstrations, to advertising and marketing. As Simon Cottle has observed, "we are living in increasingly 'promotional times'," (2003: 3) in which various groups and interests jostle for the limelight and favourable attention. The circumstances in which these films gained attention, exposure and prominence through the media are therefore worthy of further investigation.

As this research will show, the visibility acquired by these films was both a blessing and a curse. It helped magnify and disperse their political arguments and it increased their potential audience, while at the same time exposing them to higher levels of scrutiny, judgement and critique. This reflects the downside of visibility in today's culture in which it can impart power, but also breed "a new and distinctive kind of *fragility*" (Thompson 2005: 42; emphasis in original). Thompson makes this point in relation to political leaders and how the visibility bestowed upon them by the media both magnifies and undermines their power. As will be argued throughout this thesis, a similar dynamic can be observed with popular political documentaries and the prominent though contested position they came to occupy.

Discussing the popular political documentary's visibility leads to the next point which maintains that their visibility was generated through countless media-on-media interactions. Every screening, preview, review and interview about these films served to enhance their visibility while at the same time bringing other media, other

perspectives and other voices into play. Returning to the anecdote that opened this chapter, the coverage that surrounded *An Inconvenient Truth* in Australia included various commentators, experts and scientists who spoke about the film in various ways: for example, considering it within the context of the Australian government's climate change policies, Australia's environmental movement or Australia's own experience of a changing climate. This interaction between the films and other media therefore did more than just boost the visibility of these films, it also served to expand and modify the various meanings and interpretations that surrounded them.

This study of how popular political documentaries interact with other media will focus much of its attention on how these films interacted with the Australian press. According to John Hartley, journalism offers "a huge store of human sense-making... documenting the social, personal, cultural and political interactions of contemporary life" (1996: 3). In presenting what Stuart Hall has called its own "structure of meanings" (1975: 18), the newspaper – or the press - offers an imperfect but illuminating guide to the sense-making practices of a community. The interaction between the press and popular political documentaries can therefore tell us much about the cultural position occupied by these films. This interaction will be viewed from a number of perspectives throughout this thesis – from the interaction between different media forms and genres, through to the interaction between political culture and popular culture; between the news media and popular entertainment, to the interaction between an American cultural product and an Australian reception setting.

Studying the relationship between popular political documentaries and the press inevitably raises questions of influence and power. As will be developed further, the

press represents a privileged space over which many groups and interests compete for a place (see Wolfsfeld 1997). These dynamics have attracted substantial academic interest in the forces that shape news production. One particular area of interest here is the so-called 'sociology of sources' which analyses the strategies and resources that various groups in society use to secure favourable news coverage (see Cottle 2003; Manning 2001; Schlesinger 1990). While these studies typically look at the way political groups, corporations or social movements are able to access and influence the news agenda, this study will look at how popular political documentaries fared in similar endeavours.

The study of news sources has bestowed a rich array of concepts and ideas that can inform our understanding of how these films interact with the press. Key concepts that are relevant to this thesis include: *news access* – who gets into the news and how (including a focus on *news values*); *agenda-setting* – what issues are covered within the news, and the importance or attention granted to each; *framing* – how particular events or issues are interpreted and presented by the news; and *news discourse* – how these interpretations relate to broader patterns of thought or knowledge within a culture. These ideas will be developed further in later chapters.

The study of news sources often focuses on particular strategies used by actors wishing to influence the news. In this research, it is the popular political documentaries themselves that emerge as key actors with influence. It is necessary to acknowledge this unique dynamic whereby we have a media text rather than a particular interest group interacting with the press. While these films had particular spokespeople making claims on their behalf, they nevertheless engaged the press in a

fundamentally different way to other social actors. These documentaries presented the news media with a dual spectacle: that of their actual content *and* the spectacle of unprecedented numbers of people turning out to watch these films; of the film-makers travelling the globe to spruik their films while politicians and other public figures took turns praising or condemning the messages they contained. They were spectacles coloured with the vibrant urgency of popular political dissent while also being packaged and sold as mainstream entertainment.

The emergence of popular political documentaries like *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Super Size Me* and *An Inconvenient Truth* is unprecedented within cinema history. Together, they have accumulated close to $US300 million in worldwide box office takings.[6] In the months surrounding their respective releases, these films were difficult to avoid or ignore – whether one was visiting the cinema, reading the newspaper, browsing the internet or consuming other media. Politicians, journalists, scientists, corporate representatives and ordinary citizens all felt compelled to make public comments about these films. As argued above, it is this visibility, and these interactions, which make these films unique. In short, we have rarely, if ever, seen films behave or get used in these ways before.

Magnetic Media

In light of the above, this thesis introduces a new term for understanding these films. As will be argued throughout this study, popular political documentaries can be thought of as *magnetic media*. Magnetic media is a term used to describe the

[6] see Box Office Mojo (2010).

ambivalent qualities of these films which enable them to attract both audiences and other media which, in turn, generates an intriguing and illuminating blend of scrutiny, praise and scorn. It is informed by concepts drawn from the study of news and news sources while also recognising the unique ways that media texts interact with each other.

The term 'magnetic' signals the contingent and complex relationship between these films and other media. It recognises the importance of context and how this can influence the interpretation and influence of a particular media text. It also references the capacity of these films to attract and then connect a range of different meanings and ideas. As this research will show, the contribution popular political documentaries made to public knowledge was not restricted to the arguments contained within the films themselves, but rather was characterised by the diverse cluster of meanings and ideas that was generated in their interaction with other media, particularly the press.

Having introduced some of the key ideas underpinning this research it is worth taking the time to briefly define some terms. The paragraphs below will outline 'the popular' and 'the political' within popular political documentaries, while also looking at how we might define the documentary. Discussion will then move on to introducing the chapters and research that follows.

WHAT IS POPULAR ABOUT POPULAR POLITICAL DOCUMENTARIES?

Depending on the context, describing something as 'popular' can mean many things. According to Martin Conboy (drawing upon Raymond Williams and Colin Sparks)

the word 'popular', when applied to media and culture, is multi-dimensional: it can have quantitative, political and aesthetic aspects (Conboy 2002: 5).

Popular can therefore mean being well liked by many people. It can also mean something that belongs to the people; that speaks meaningfully to them or on their behalf. Included here is the sense that items of popular culture become integrated and adapted into the day-to-day lives of the people; they belong to the people who use them or engage with them in a multitude of ways (Jenkins 2006). Of course, it can also be interpreted as something 'low' or 'base' (Williams 1976: 198-9). Similarly, items of popular culture can be seen to be unduly influenced by commercial pressures, which, rather than engaging the people, instead encourage passive and detached audiences (Corner 2009). Significantly, Conboy argues that the various elements of popular culture are always in a state of flux: "In each genre of popular culture, at each point in its historical existence, the combination of the relationship... is arranged differently" (2002: 5-6).

A key concern of this thesis is to uncover how the elements of the popular listed above come together in relation to each film studied. Given the complexity of the term 'popular', there is much value in taking the time to examine *how* these films are popular. Accordingly, this research will examine box office figures and media coverage, among other indicators of each film's 'quantitative' popularity (i.e. the number of people who saw, read or heard about these films). It will also look at how these films can be linked to broader trends within popular culture, for example, their similarities with reality television, their use of spectacular imagery, or their association with celebrity. As suggested above, popular aesthetics are often seen as

'low' or 'base' and it is therefore worth observing whether such complaints are present within the coverage surrounding these films. This connects to concerns about the commercial influences within popular culture and consideration will thus be given to the commercial context of each film's production, distribution and promotion. Finally, the extent to which the popularity of these films can be linked to a political affiliation with 'the people' will also be assessed. On this latter point, it is worth moving on to consider the political features of popular political documentaries.

WHAT IS POLITICAL ABOUT POPULAR POLITICAL DOCUMENTARIES?

Politics can, and frequently does, permeate vast sections of cultural life. This is readily apparent whether one takes a broad historical perspective – looking at the rise of identity politics for example – or in more immediate contexts when we frequently hear about certain issues becoming 'politicised'. At the same time, politics can be applied in a narrower sense to refer to the workings of the state: "to the realm of parliaments and their constitutional basis, cabinet, political parties, the public service and associated political actors such as unions and employer associations" (Craig 2004: 24). A particular interest of this thesis is to look at how popular political documentaries are able to speak across both these aspects of the political: engaging the broader culture while, at the same time, circulating within this narrower domain of 'formal' politics.

Whether it be urging for political action on climate change or questioning the validity of the 'war on terror', popular political documentaries have engaged with some of the most pressing political issues of our time. In very broad terms, we can regard them as

forms of political communication, understood here as "purposeful communication about politics" (McNair 2003: 4).

Describing popular political documentaries as forms of political communication ('purposeful communication about politics') leads to the next point which is the acknowledgement that these films are political actors in their own right. In today's society, media are a significant part of political culture. The way they select and interpret events and their portrayal of certain issues and people affect the way politics is understood within a community and also the way those working within politics choose to act (McNair 2003). Such ideas are often linked explicitly to the news media but, as Jeffrey P. Jones argues, "we must... recognise that there is a profusion of media, almost all of which carry some form of political content" (2008: 167). The challenge here is to understand how popular political documentaries, as a particular form of media, engage the world of politics. These films comment directly on issues of political importance and, while their influence in this regard is difficult to measure, their stated purpose is often to change the course of political debate. Indeed, it is often a claim made on behalf of the documentary that it can intervene in public debates, swaying the opinion of the public and policy-makers alike (see Cousins 2007; Hardy 1966).

In assessing these claims of political influence, it is vital that we consider the timing and the broader political contexts of each film's release. As will be argued in the case studies that follow, there was a strong correspondence between the release of each film and the presence of divisive political issues. For example, *Super Size Me*'s Australian release happened to coincide with broader political debates about the so-

called obesity crisis and the marketing of fast-food to children (see Yaxley 2004). Understanding these contexts is imperative for appreciating the political aspect of these films.

This engagement with prominent political issues relates to another political aspect of these films which is their *oppositional* character. Whether targeted against corporations or governments, popular political documentaries typically criticise established domains of power. There is an important link here between the politics of these films and their popularity – the extent to which they claim to speak on the people's behalf in relation to the actions of powerful institutions.

The oppositional quality of these films invites comparison with other forms of political advocacy which have become increasingly prominent in recent times. As one reviewer in *The Australian* wrote, "yesterday's pamphleteers now brandish cameras and mikes" (Williams 2004: B22). These films should be considered alongside other forms of political activism, particularly those which rely heavily on the media, such as internet campaigns, 'culture jamming', or the use of celebrity endorsement.

The ideas and perspectives presented within popular political documentaries all engage with pre-existing discourses, for example, discourses of public health in *Super Size Me*, or those of the environment in *An Inconvenient Truth.* While ideas relating to discourse theory will be explored in further detail in the third chapter, for now discourse can be broadly defined as the wider networks of meaning in which all forms of cultural expression operate (Foucault 1972; Fairclough 1992).[7] When *Fahrenheit*

[7] See chapter three for a deeper discussion of discourse and the divergent approaches of these two theorists.

9/11 criticises the 'war on terror' it adds to, and is influenced by, the various networks of meaning surrounding this issue.

This notion of discourse brings another political dimension of these films to the fore. Significant here is the idea that discourses do not circulate on a level playing field; there is a hierarchy involved. For example, the status of the person speaking or communicating affects how their particular message is listened to and respected (Gray 2006: 38). We see this everyday in the news where the old adage 'names make news' rings true in the amount of coverage given to political elites, celebrities and other prominent persons (Marshall 2005). Also, certain discourses carry more weight than others, for example, discourses of science and modern medicine tend to be more culturally accepted than those related to herbal or non-Western medicine. Discourse thus refers not only to different networks of meaning, but also the networks of power in which these meanings circulate (Gray 2006).

A key component of the research that follows will therefore concern the way both the films and the coverage surrounding them spoke within different discourses. Significantly, given their oppositional quality outlined earlier, popular political documentaries engage in what can be described as a kind of counter-discursive struggle, whereby the meanings they circulate are in direct opposition to other prevailing sources of meaning (whether they be the government, corporations or the mainstream media). In supplying oppositional meanings that are popularly accessible, these films arguably have the potential to influence and perhaps change the ways in which certain issues are understood within a community. Studying the coverage surrounding these films can perhaps yield evidence of such discursive shifts. In these

ways, this research connects with broader inquiries about media diversity, and the prospects for alternative and marginalised voices to be heard within the public sphere (see DeLuca & Peeples 2002; Fenton & Downey 2003; Rojecki 2002).

Finally, it should be noted that there is a certain fluidity about the field of 'the political', which needs to be acknowledged when discussing the political aspects of these films. Politics is an amorphous domain that can impact upon society in surprising and unpredictable ways. A pertinent example here would be the political debate triggered in the USA by the release of the French documentary *March of the Penguins* (2005). This film about the mating practices of Emperor Penguins could hardly be regarded as purposeful communication about politics, as per the definition of political communication above, yet it went on to provoke political debate about family values and the role of religion in public life (Miller 2005). Accordingly, there is a need to preserve a sense of contingency and flexibility when talking about the political qualities of these films. Similar to the discussion of 'the popular' above, this investigation of 'the political' within popular political documentaries will be geared towards exploring *how* these films are political, recognising that this field is far from static.

WHAT ABOUT THE DOCUMENTARY?

Although contested, John Grierson's definition of the documentary as the "creative treatment of actuality" captures the complexity that lies at the heart of documentary practice – the attempt to create, in some way, an accurate and truthful representation of reality (qtd in Hardy 1966: 11). Of course, in today's environment, the label

'documentary' can potentially be applied to a multitude of forms: from televised investigative journalism to reality television, from *Borat* (2006) to *YouTube.* Meanwhile, like its realist cousin journalism, the documentary's privileged claim to represent reality has become ever more contested within late (or post) modern conditions of media scepticism or, as John Hartley has dubbed it, a "post-truth society" (1992). The authority with which the documentary might once have spoken – *the camera never lies* – has unquestionably been eroded (see Winston 1995). This, not surprisingly, has provoked considerable debate about the definition and status of the documentary within our culture (see Bruzzi 2000; Eitzen 1995; Nichols 1991; Platinga 1996).

In light of the above, it makes sense to offer only a very broad description of how this thesis understands the term 'documentary'. The task is made somewhat easier due to this study's explicit focus on the cinematic documentary, which, as Corner points out, "still has the strong contrast with its dominant Other – feature film – against which it can be simply defined as 'non-fiction'" (2004). Having said that, the cultural position occupied by the documentary is not simply defined by the format in which it is presented. Though they may start their public life in cinemas, they are rapidly transferred, and transformed across a variety of media and a variety of reception settings – from the DVD, through to television broadcasts, alongside accompanying websites, newspaper reports and so on. Accordingly, this thesis understands documentaries as films which have *a meaningful relationship with reality, which is nevertheless culturally negotiated.* Documentary texts do not exist in a vacuum and whatever truth claims they make, provided they are deemed important enough, will have to pass scrutiny from spectators, other media, and other sources of knowledge,

which will inevitably bring their own beliefs and interpretations. This conception of the documentary links back to the significance of media interactions discussed earlier. While further features of the documentary will be explored in Chapter Two, I will now explain how this research will be structured.

STRUCTURE

This thesis consists of six chapters and a conclusion, including three case studies. The first two chapters map out a theoretical basis for understanding the emergence of popular political documentaries and the way they interact with other media, particularly the press. The third chapter outlines the research design for this thesis before the remaining chapters analyse each film in turn.

Chapter One, "Popular Political Documentaries: The Debate Thus Far," reviews the literature to date concerning these films. It will show how analyses and commentary surrounding these films have often been incorporated into debates about the media's relationship to society. Without discounting this debate, the second half of the chapter will advance the argument that these films can be better understood by first considering the profound changes occurring within the broader media environment. Such a context encourages us to reconsider some established ideas about the media, while also encouraging a focus on how different media interact with each other.

Chapter Two, "Documentaries, the Press and Public Knowledge: Theorising Interaction," picks up this theme of interaction to develop some key concepts underpinning this research. The cultural significance of both the documentary and the

press will be considered before looking at the relationship between these media forms. It will be argued that the press acts as an 'interpretive audience' in relation to these films. Such an idea is not intended to overlook the complex forces shaping journalistic behaviour and the production of news; rather, it draws attention to the fact journalists are media consumers too and each item of coverage they produced about these films can be read as a particular form of public interpretation of their meaning and significance. This discussion leads to an overview of the different ways in which we can understand the interaction between these films and the press – from seeing it as an encounter between different meanings and media cultures, to observing the flow of information and ideas across different spaces within the public sphere.

The concepts developed in the first two chapters encourage a mixed-method of research which is detailed in Chapter Three, "Researching Popular Political Documentaries". This method incorporates both quantitative and qualitative approaches, including a textual analysis of the films, a content analysis of their coverage in the Australian press, and a range of news analysis approaches including framing, agenda-setting, discourse analysis and source analysis. The strengths and weaknesses of each of approach will be discussed, while making the argument that they can all be usefully combined in the one research method.

Chapters Four to Six comprise the three case studies. Chapter Four focuses on *Fahrenheit 9/11*. It analyses the film's production as a marketable commodity with the unique celebrity of Michael Moore as a key selling point. Looking at the text itself, this chapter explores its use of humour and other pop-cultural references while also looking at how the context of the hugely divisive Iraq War and widespread anti-

American sentiment were key features of *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s international release. The analysis of the film's interaction with the Australian press shows how the film's magnetic qualities allowed Moore to access the press and speak prominently about the film and politics more broadly. At the same time, the film's magnetism attracted debate about whether or not the film itself was propaganda. This reflected more than just a disagreement with the substance of the film's political message, but also its style.

Chapter Five looks at *Super Size Me* and begins by considering the influence that Michael Moore has had on the documentary marketplace. The argument here is that Moore's earlier successes made it easier for films like *Super Size Me* to be produced and, more importantly, find distribution. The influence of Moore can also be found in the humorous and personal style of the film, which also has a strong correspondence with certain types of reality television. In this case study, the popular political documentary will be likened to a piece of cinematic culture jamming – an argument that has relevance to all three films. *Super Size Me* constitutes a symbolic attack on the McDonald's brand, which, in the context of rising concerns about obesity and the broader influence of corporate power, was able to attract plenty of attention. The magnetism of *Super Size Me* enabled it to become a "trigger event" which helped push obesity up the news media agenda (Dearing & Rogers 1996). It also provoked the McDonald's Corporation into a prominent and expensive public relations response.

Chapter Six analyses *An Inconvenient Truth.* As the last of the three case studies, this chapter sums up some of the key features of popular political documentaries,

including notions of performance, spectacle and convergence. The film was a key player in the public transformation of Al Gore's image – a transformation which ultimately occurred through the interaction of various media. The magnetism of *An Inconvenient Truth* could be seen in the range of climate change arguments it drew forth into the public domain. The film was ultimately interpreted by the press as a key turning point within Australian climate change politics. Accordingly, this chapter will argue that the film constitutes a "critical discourse moment" – a moment which helped change the way climate change was understood and discussed in Australia (Carvalho 2005; Gamson 1992).

Finally, the conclusion summarises the key findings of each case study before looking further at how the findings of this thesis might be applied to our understanding of media more broadly. In particular, the further applicability of magnetic media is discussed along with ways in which the research model used here might be adapted to suit other settings and concerns.

CHAPTER 1

POPULAR POLITICAL DOCUMENTARIES:

THE DEBATE THUS FAR

As the first decade of the twenty-first century came to a close, critics, bloggers and hacks across the globe began to engage in the perennial ritual of summing up the past ten years – the so-called 'noughties.' For those with an interest in cinema, a common point to remark upon was the success and prominence of the documentary. The film magazine *Empire* listed "Life-Changing Documentaries" as one of its top ten film trends of the decade (Empire 2009); London's *Daily Telegraph* noted how "documentaries... have flourished" (Gritten, Robey and Sandhu 2009) while a film-writer for *indieWIRE* observed that "it's really been a stunning decade for documentaries" (Knegt 2009). These are just a small sample of the widespread claims that the documentary's cultural position has undergone some profound changes.

While various commentators have remarked on the shifts occurring within the world of the documentary, others have grappled with the much broader trends that have transformed the media over a similar, if not longer, period. The same decade in which these popular political documentaries emerged happened to coincide with the continuing growth of the internet, the rise of social networking, the digitalisation of technology, and continuing permutations in media ownership and media regulation (see Dahlgren 2009). In response to these changes, some theorists have argued that the

contemporary global communications environment has reached a level of complexity and diversity unprecedented in human history (Cottle 2009; Lull 2007; McNair 2003a, 2006). Brian McNair, for example, argues that today's media environment is "qualitatively different – and necessarily more chaotic – than any confronted by social actors (and media sociologists) before" (2006: 50-1).

This chapter will bring the ideas expressed in the above two paragraphs together. Looking firstly at the emergence of popular political documentaries, discussion will consider the place of these films within documentary history before considering the range of arguments made for or against them. However, as will be argued in the latter stages of this chapter, none of these arguments go far enough in recognising the broader context of media change of which these films are a part. This context of change has been usefully theorised by Brian McNair (2003a; 2006) and Henry Jenkins (2006) who write about "cultural chaos" and "cultural convergence" respectively. While McNair concentrates mainly on global journalism trends and Jenkins focuses on a broader array of popular media, both theorists have developed approaches to understanding the media, which make this context of change and transformation a central concern.

This context of change is important because it challenges many established ideas about the way we understand the media's role within society, including the relationships between audiences and media, and the relationships between different forms of media. It encourages a new perspective on these films, one that looks at the way they establish a presence across a diverse range of media while also considering

the way audiences and other media reacted to them. In short, it encourages us to look at how these films interacted with the broader media environment.

A History of Unpopularity

The historical inability of politically oriented, feature-length documentaries to attract large audiences has been well-documented. The noted political documentarian, Emile de Antonio, whose films such as *In the Year of the Pig* (1968) are credited with influencing many subsequent film-makers and political activists (see McEnteer 2006), was quoted in the early 1980s lamenting the audience-pulling capacity of his films:

> I get the audience I know I'm going to get. I suffer from small audiences, I know that. It's too bad that those gorgeous colour spectaculars are the things that reach the masses of people, and that films like mine are customarily seen by college graduates, intellectuals, East Side audiences, or public television audiences. What kind of audience, theoretically, would I have wanted for *In the Year of the Pig?* I would have liked police and working class, blue collar guys who were for the war to have seen it. (qtd in Crowdus & Georgakas 2005: 109)

De Antonio's remarks correspond with a number of other analyses which have placed the documentary on the margins of popular culture. Brian Winston's (1995) account of documentary history argues that the documentary has been a marginalised form throughout its history. He describes the "realist documentary" as it developed in the United Kingdom and elsewhere as "an audiovisual form that most of the time nobody – certainly nobody who is not middle class – wants to watch; and it is arguable that they never did" (1995: 61). Pat Aufderheide, meanwhile, observed that documentaries, whatever their subject matter, have always struggled to succeed commercially: "...none of them, it seemed, could elbow their way onto a shelf at Blockbuster. Typically they lay sedately in coffin-like black plastic cases behind a college librarian's desk" (2005: 24).

The capacity of popular political documentaries to attract large audiences is therefore historically significant. While records of box office takings can be notoriously imprecise (see Arthur 2004), especially when considered on a global level, they do offer a broad indication of the attention and popularity a particular film has enjoyed. The figures for the last decade point to a marked growth in the documentary's popular appeal. Nine of the top ten highest grossing documentaries have been made since 2002 and a common thread amongst a number of these movies is their distinct political focus.[8] Some of the more prominent releases in recent times have included: *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009), *Sicko* (2007), *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), *Who Killed the Electric Car?* (2006), *A Crude Awakening: The Oil Crash* (2006), *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism* (2004), *Control Room* (2004), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), *Super Size Me* (2004), *The Fog of War* (2003), *The Corporation* (2003) and *Bowling for Columbine* (2002).

The popularity of these films has been regularly commented upon. For some observers, they herald a "golden age" of documentary film (McEnteer 2006: viv); others argue that documentaries have become part of "movie-goers vernacular" – in other words, going to the cinema to watch a documentary has become a common practice (Cole qtd in D-Word 2004). This change of fortune for the political documentary has been interpreted by critics and academics in a variety of ways. These responses can be grouped into three broad categories: those who see the emergence of these films as a *corrective to the news media*, those who see them as *corrosive of real debate*, and those who applaud the way they *popularise politics*. It should be noted

[8] According to figures provided by Box Office Mojo (2010).

that these perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive (see Gitlin 2004; Renov 2005). However, for the purpose of clarity and analysis, there is considerable value in isolating each perspective, allowing insight into what is being argued, and also, what might be at stake in our understanding of popular political documentaries.

A Corrective to the News Media

One way of interpreting the emergence of popular political documentaries has been to see it as a corrective to the failings of the mainstream news media. Film writer James McEnteer accounts for the rise of the documentary in the following terms:

> There exists... a great hunger to understand what's really going on. These films help feed that need. Much of the hunger has to do with the concentrated ownership of the news media, the corporatization and trivialization of the news, and the decreasing spectrum of information. Instead of innovation and investigation, we get repetition and imitation. (McEnteer: 2006: xii)

In a similar vein, Morgan Spurlock, the director of *Super Size Me*, argues that:

> We live in a world where documentary film, independent documentary film has truly become the last bastion of free speech... 'Cause the fact is you're not getting a lot, or what you do get [from the mainstream media] is a very watered down version of the truth. (Spurlock qtd in *CFSM* 2004)

In mid-2005 the American film journal *Cineaste* published a special article in which distributors, artists, film-makers and scholars were asked to account for "a virtual renaissance of the documentary in America" (2005: 29). A common feature across many of the responses was a sense that the political documentary was stepping in to fill the void created by news media failures. For example, film director Thom Anderson, argued that:

> the war [Iraq] has cast a pall over all our lives, and we are all driven to make sense of it. The newspapers offer little help and the television none at all... When it turns out that Sean Penn knew more about Iraq (after two days in Baghdad) than the C.I.A., the humble documentary filmmaker might have more to say than the most lavishly-endowed news channel. (Anderson: 2005: 32)

Danny Schechter, a film-maker, scholar and regular critic of the news media, argues that "the deterioration of our media system and the degradation of the news" have driven many people "to seek more diverse perspectives and in-depth portrayals" (2005: 31).

This idea that the emergence of the popular political documentary is linked to news media failings is based, first of all, on the idea that the ultimate function of news media is to serve democracy. Such a view typically stresses their capacity to monitor the activities of those in power; disseminating accurate and useful information; providing space for public discussion and debate; and providing shared cultural resources, which, in turn, can help foster a sense of community (Curran 2002: 5-7). It is here that we find the ideal of the news media as the 'fourth estate,' society's watch-dog which acts on the public's behalf. As Dahlgren argues, "even if journalism in the real world has never operated quite in this way, this paradigmatic model of how it should be has guided our understanding and expectation of it" (2009: 41).

As seen in the explanations given for the popular political documentary above, the news media is now frequently accused of failing to meet these public responsibilities. There are a number of different criticisms here, including: the rise of infotainment, reflective of a shift in which entertainment targeting large audiences is pursued at the expense of analysis, depth and detail; an information surplus in which saturation

coverage leads to boredom and disengagement; or other trends such as the expansion of unsubstantiated opinion, an undue emphasis on conflict and, the pervasive influence of 'public relations' (McNair 2000: 3-6). These issues animate a range of works which lament the current state of the news media (see Bennet 2001; Bourdieu 1998; Burton 2007; Franklin 1997).

The criticisms listed above are commonly linked to political, commercial or technological explanations. The political explanations most relevant here include the claim that political elites manipulate the flow and shape of news and information to suit their own agendas, particularly during times of conflict and crisis. Phillip Knightley (2000), for example, has argued that the Western media's coverage of foreign conflicts has become increasingly influenced and controlled by governments and the military. More recently, Daya Kishan Thussu has argued that there is a "growing tendency among US-dominated global news networks to follow Washington's foreign policy agenda" during the post-Cold War period (2005: 271). Reasons for this include the media's dependency on government or military sources of information, which makes them increasingly susceptible to various public relations strategies, and the media's own propensity to present these conflicts in a simplified or jingoistic way.

This latter point highlights the intersection between political and commercial pressures where a reliance on government sources coincides with strategies of representation geared towards attracting audiences. Journalism, like other forms of media, has a commodity value and, for many observers, it is the commercial aspects

of news production which have played a leading role in the news media's decline (Allan 2005).

Jurgen Habermas' hugely influential account of the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe offers a classic depiction of how commercialisation is seen to affect news media and the public more broadly. Despite noting how the commercialisation of the media played a key role in enabling this public sphere in the first place, through the establishment of journals and pamphlets driven firstly by commercial interests, Habermas details how the reflective space provided by such media came to be over-run by these very same forces. To use his terms, a journalism of conviction gave way to a journalism of commerce (1974: 53, 1989). This process, referred to as "re-feudalisation", is seen as part of a broader trend in which the public sphere – a place for reasoned debate and the formation of political will – has become crudely disfigured by the dual advance of the market and state power.

Habermas' critique of commercialised media bears the imprint of his Frankfurt School forebears and their deep pessimism about commercialised culture (see Adorno 1991). Critical approaches to the media have evolved considerably since the Frankfurt School first came to prominence in the 1930s but many observers today remain deeply concerned about the impact of commercial pressures on the news media.A main problem here is that commercial interests are often seen to supersede journalistic ethics or ideals (see Dahlgren 2009). Accordingly, the public service role of the news media is seen to be undermined and so too then is democracy. As Franklin reminds us "without an informed citizenry, democracy is impoverished and at risk" (1997: 5).

It is important to note that some criticisms of media performance are based around technology rather than commercial or political factors (McNair 2000: 7). These technological factors include the increased time-demands that come with 24/7 news networks, and the rise of the internet and satellite technology which, some argue, put greater time pressures on journalists and limit their capacity to provide accurate, informed and detailed analysis of important events (see Allan & Zelizer 2004). Combining the political, commercial and the technological factors we can begin to appreciate why this perceived deterioration of the news media has occurred.

The above paragraphs have connected ways of interpreting the emergence of popular political documentaries with broader critiques about the news media. Working through these explanations, we can begin to establish links between these films and aspects of the broader media environment – in this case, the political, commercial and technological factors which influence media production. As will be explored below, these inter-related factors are vital to our understanding of the place these films have within our culture.

Firstly, it should be noted that these films often present themselves as alternatives to the news or, at the very least, are highly critical of it. To use some examples not covered extensively in this thesis: Robert Greenwald's *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism* targets the American Fox News channel in a bid to show how concentrated media ownership can lead to biased news coverage which distorts public debate. Meanwhile, *Control Room* offers an inside look at the Arab news channel Al Jazeera in a bid to counter views in the West that the network offers little more than

propaganda (PBS 2005). It has become a characteristic feature of many of these films to present themselves as reliable, alternative sources of news during a time in which, it is argued, "concerned citizens who want real, unbiased news can't trust CNN any more than Fox News" (Diaz 2005: 33).

The popular political documentary's position as an alternative source of news, implicit in both the films and explanations given about their emergence, invokes the genre's public service traditions. There are links here to the hugely influential British documentary movement of the 1930s, which saw civic education as a primary goal (see Barnouw 1983; Corner 2004; Ellis & McLane 2006; Hardy 1966). There are also strong links to journalism which, according to Corner (1996), has been a dominant influence on the documentary. He argues that the documentary is now seen by many producers and consumers as "a means of *expanded reportage*" (1996: 2). Drawn from either legacy – the British documentary movement or the journalistic – the public service function of the documentary remains explicit. Although these two approaches do not cover the spectrum of documentary practice, they do point to the established (though not uncontested) idea that the documentary can have an enlightening, public-oriented function within society.

The arguments presented thus far see the popular political documentary as an alternative source of news and information during a time in which the news media is seen to have failed in upholding its public service responsibilities. The emergence of these films is thus incorporated into broader debates about changing journalism practices and the commercialisation of the news media. However, at least two problems remain.

Firstly, the actual nature of the documentary text remains unquestioned here. One thing that is readily apparent when viewing these films is the extent to which they differ from other forms of the documentary that are more traditionally aligned with the public service functions discussed above. As noted earlier, the diversity of documentary practice throughout history provokes caution about making sweeping claims about what documentaries are necessarily like. Nevertheless, the stylistic eclecticism of these films, their subjective approach and their use of humour among other textual features represent a clear divergence from the public service approaches discussed above. Their correspondence with documentary history is arguably stronger with the traditions of activist film-making (see Waugh 1984) or the gonzo journalism of the 1960s. At the very least, the textual qualities of these films need to be interrogated in order to better understand them.

Secondly, in a point related to the first, it has been noted how the above perspectives call into question the capacity of the news media to deliver within a sharply commercial environment. However, this same scrutiny can easily be applied to these films which, of course, are also part of the same media and cultural landscape. In fact, as will be shown below, there have been a number of interpretations of these films which, rather than viewing them as an antidote to an ailing news media, instead see them infected with the same problems.

CORROSIVE OF REAL DEBATE

While not wholly critical of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Todd Gitlin's (2004) discussion of the film denounces Michael Moore as "the master demagogue an age of demagoguery made." According to Gitlin, Moore is "neither journalist, nor documentarian" and, while he is sympathetic to Moore's politics, Gitlin's attitude towards the film is ultimately one of lament, captured succinctly in his headline, "Michael Moore, Alas" (2004). An Australian review of *Super Size Me* ruefully observed how "the meatier issues surrounding obesity were deep-fried by a shamelessly self-abusive stunt" (Paatsch 2004). Meanwhile, the showing of *An Inconvenient Truth* in schools in the United Kingdom has been the subject of legal action following claims that the movie is based on questionable science (BBC 2007). Such negativity towards these films stands in stark contrast to the previous section and thus warrants some further examination here.

One particular source of disquiet about the popular political documentaries seems to derive, in part, from the sense that these films have moved away from the documentary's core ideals. As Paul Arthur has observed, "the new breed of nonfiction is edging ever closer to stylistic prerogatives of fictional cinema" (2005: 20). Indeed, as will be discussed in greater detail in the case studies that follow, a key feature of popular political documentaries is their strong correspondence with other forms of popular entertainment.

This idea of documentaries being closely aligned with popular entertainment grates against many established ideas about the documentary. Bill Nichols oft-cited description of the documentary as one of the "discourses of sobriety" neatly captures a

particular aura that has surrounded the documentary for much of its history (1991: 4). This aura is one of social seriousness; and it is one that has influenced both the documentary's approach to its subjects, and the audience's approach to the documentary. As Belinda Smaill has argued, "much documentary is seen to be the antithesis of entertainment" (2006: 51). At least that was the case until the popular political documentary arrived.

The above points have led a number of critics to argue that popular political documentaries have become too preoccupied with entertaining viewers, at the expense of educating or informing them (see for example Benson & Snee 2008; Sharrett & Luhr 2005; Sullivan 2004). This is the argument made by Benson and Snee in their analysis of various political documentaries (including *Fahrenheit 9/11*) made to coincide with the 2004 American election:

> commodified media spectacles have limited force... because their persuasive power rests in the need to 'experience' the film, ensuring their value as commercially marketed entertainment but restricting their capacity to motivate and sustain meaningful political change. (Benson & Snee 2008: 18)

Commenting on the broader trends linking entertainment with politics, Nancy Snow argues that "entertainment doesn't stress us or tax us; that's the point... I can simply take it in through my senses and that's not good for real tackling of issues or working on reasoning and critical thinking skills" (qtd in Goodale 2004). According to such views, the serious political messages of these films risk being diluted, or lost altogether, amidst the pleasure of the viewing experience.

There is an important correlation here between these concerns about entertainment, and the concerns about commercial influences discussed in the previous section. Pat Aufderheide makes this link explicitly by observing that "the same profit pressures

that have lowered standards in news production and raised the ante for shock, sex and violence in mainstream television and film are now being applied to the documentary" (Aufderheide 2005: 24). Such arguments raise questions about the commercial forces driving the production of popular political documentaries.

The environment in which popular political documentaries were produced and distributed is heavily commercialised. The American film industry in particular has come to be dominated by a select group of media conglomerates – the so-called "Big Six" of Time Warner, Viacom, News Corporation, Sony, GE and Disney (Schatz 2009: 45). While the existence of a strong independent film industry in America needs to be recognised (see Schatz 2009), the commercial activity of the Big Six in particular has an enormous influence on the shape and character of contemporary American film. There is something of a paradox then in a number of popular political documentaries which, despite their political allegiances, often rely on the production and distribution networks of the very system they wish to criticise.

The career of Michael Moore presents the clearest example here. His films and books often take aim at America's corporate culture yet, at the same time, make these corporations money through his immense market appeal. As one commentator has argued in relation to *Fahrenheit 9/11*, "Michael Moore was essentially working for Disney when he created the film" (Christensen qtd in Szeman 2008). Of course, such concerns about commercial influences were magnified following Disney's refusal to distribute the film (see Chapter Four). While this theme will be developed further in the case studies that follow, there is a long tradition of media scholarship which argues that commercial media will inevitably serve to promote commercial interests,

whether it be in the range of media available, or the themes, ideas and discourses presented within such media (McChesney 2008). This tradition encompasses both the political economy approach, and particular forms of critical cultural analysis indebted to Marxism. The former tends to focus on how the structures that produce media influence what gets produced and how, whereas the latter tends to focus more on how commercial interests become embedded within media texts (Kellner 1997). Both approaches have direct links to the criticisms of the news media given in the previous section, however, as suggested already they can just as easily be applied to popular political documentaries as well.

Another area in which commercial influences are seen to have a detrimental impact involves the aesthetic qualities of these films. Film scholar Paula Rabinowitz, for example, draws unfavourable comparisons between recent political documentaries and those from the 'great' documentarians of years gone by:

> It verges on the obscene to write about Moore or Robert Greenwald on the same page as Vertov or Marker or Lanzmann. None of the films generated with such energy during recent election seasons can be mistaken for art. (2005: 31)

Meanwhile, Ellis and McLane (2006) raise questions about the aesthetic quality of *Super Size Me*, which they argue "feels more like a home movie than a finished work meant to be screened in theatres" (328). They argue that the technological changes which have made documentaries cheaper and easier to produce can also result in work perceived to be of a lower quality (2006: 328).

Whether it be criticising the way in which these films try to entertain, or the way they are produced, the critiques listed in this section indicate how the popular political documentary is seen by some as a continuation of the media 'decline' outlined earlier,

rather than a positive reaction to it. According to such views, the emergence of popular political documentaries is lamentable; their mode of communicating about serious political issues is seen to arouse emotions and antipathies which, according to Andrew Sullivan, "are deeply corrosive of real debate and reason in our culture" (2004; talking specifically about *Fahrenheit 9/11*). These arguments connect with the critique of the news media outlined earlier. In both there is a sense that the media – whether it be the news media or the popular political documentary – are failing to provide the appropriate conditions upon which public discussion and political debate can occur. At the extreme end of such views, the films are dismissed as propaganda (to be discussed further in Chapter Four), or as further evidence of the relentless encroachment of commercial logic into the political realm.

As noted earlier, there is a more positive perspective on these films which see them as a reaction, or a response, to the news media's shortcomings. However, the criticisms outlined in this section recognise these films are part of the same media environment as much of the news media. Accordingly, they are seen to be just as susceptible to commercial influences and other trends that cut across various media genres and various media forms. There is a sense here of various media forms *working together* to produce certain outcomes – in this case, the continuing decline of media quality in the face of commercial pressure.

Of course, the changing media practices discussed above do not necessarily have to be regarded so negatively. In fact, research and theorising within media studies over the last few decades has challenged this sense of pessimism when it comes to evaluating these changes and the influence of commercial culture more generally (Hartley 1996;

McKee 2005; McNair 2006). To explore this further, this discussion will now turn to evaluations of the popular political documentary which, rather than positing it against or within a negative conception of the media, instead emphasise their ability to make important political issues accessible to a large audience.

POPULARISING POLITICS

According to Joel Bakan, author of the book *The Corporation* and writer of the documentary of the same name, the emergence of popular political documentaries indicates that "popular culture is embracing politics in a way that it hasn't since the 1960s" (qtd in Sterritt 2004). The popularity of these films indicates at least some level of public engagement with politics. Whereas above the intermingling of politics and entertainment was viewed negatively, the arguments presented below argue that such a phenomenon can actually have a positive, or progressive, effect. In this instance, entertainment can be regarded as the gateway for a more meaningful engagement with political culture.

The views in this section come from a variety of perspectives but there is a strong correspondence here with what James Curran (2002) has called "the populist narrative" of media history and research. This relatively recent approach to understanding the media's development is described by Curran in the following terms:

> The popularization of the media is portrayed as a democratic triumph in which popular preferences were acknowledged to have validity... it is represented as a real breakthrough in which the media were converted into becoming major sources of popular pleasure. (2002: 14)

This perspective incorporates what Curran calls an "extraordinarily heterogeneous group" (2002: 23) and this is reflected in the range of opinions offered below. In light of this, the following discussion will attend to two major ideas separately: one, these films valuably broaden the ways in which politics is discussed; and two, they show how commercial media might not be such a bad thing.

Firstly, the presentation of these films as mainstream entertainment accessible in mainstream cinemas can be read as confirmation that politics is a broad and diverse field that can be engaged with in many ways. Such a reading moves away from more traditional ideals about politics and public communication which tend to value reason, rationality and soberly delivered information (see Fraser 1992; Schudson 1998). These ideals are now regarded by some theorists as anti-democratic in the limits they place on political expression while also failing to recognise the factors that shape people's political attachments in the first place (see Fraser 1992). Politics, as John Hartley argues, "is not only a matter of rational calculation but also a source of affiliative passions and an object of personal desires" (2007: 148, see also Hallin 1994: 9). Such ideas inform Belinda Smaill's evaluation of the popularity of these documentaries, which, she argues, owes "much... to the way these filmmakers appreciate the intractable relationship between politics and the passion of emotions" (2006: 51).

When posited against the news media, this evaluation of popular political documentaries is enthusiastic about their deviation from established documentary traditions. Documentary scholar Michael Renov (2005) argues that: "as personal manifestos or political essays, *no longer tethered to the censorious norms of*

broadcast journalism, the political documentary has been reborn" (2005: 30; emphasis added). Within his critique of Australian current affairs television, Graeme Turner discusses the success of Michael Moore and ponders:

> Perhaps, in the end, Michael Moore appeals because, by and large, he is not what contemporary journalism has become. Passionate, committed, prepared to bend the rules in pursuit of political change rather than merely a high-rating program... (2005: 91)

In this respect, the success of these films is measured less in their correspondence with assumed standards about how the media should operate, but rather in relation to how they make certain issues accessible and meaningful for their audience. There is some correspondence here with more sympathetic portrayals of contemporary commercial media, including popular, or tabloid forms of journalism. While commercial pressures are often blamed for declining standards, they can also be viewed as encouraging producers to work harder to attract audience interest. Dahlgren (2009) is one of many (see Hartley 1996, 1999; McKee 2005; Harrington 2008) who has recognised the positives that can be associated with popular, and commercial, media forms:

> In a diverse media landscape, popular forms of journalism can address those segments of the population who may feel excluded by more highbrow formats and discursive registers; such forms can engage, evoke and provoke, serving as catalysts for discussion and debate. (Dahlgren 2009: 46)

Such views have been applied to incorporate a diverse range of media: from fictional films, to popular music and internet fan-sites (see Street 2001; van Zoonen 2007, 2005). The emphasis here is often on what people, as media consumers, do with these popular accounts of politics and how they might be incorporated into their own political thinking (van Zoonen 2007: 531). In evaluating the popular political documentary, the issue becomes less about the form or style of these films, but rather,

the extent to which they can encourage people to engage with their social and political world.

Within the above arguments, we find a less restricted emphasis on the media standards and also a different understanding of commercial influences. As noted in the previous sections, commercial influences on the media are often lamented for the role they play in trumping other interests, in particular, those of the public. However, Brian McNair (2006) argues that commercial pressures have actually fuelled greater innovation and diversity within the media, as different outlets are forced to compete with one another to attract loyal audiences. He sees the emergence of popular political documentaries as evidence of a "counter-cultural marketplace" in which:

> Dissent and dissidence have places to go and be heard, including the mainstream multiplex, the glossy pages of *Vanity Fair*, or the bestseller shelves in Borders' book store. You may not like the government but you can't say that you're not allowed to criticise it relentlessly and without mercy, and to consume with glee the criticisms of others, be they journalists, documentary-makers, academics or stand-up comedians. (2006: 203)

McNair's ideas will be returned to later in this chapter, however, for now his comments alert us to a different conception of commercial media which can inform our understanding of popular political documentaries. They show how the commercialisation of the media can be understood as positively fostering diversity and a greater respect for audience desires. As Alan McKee has argued: "commercialization is a valuable part of the public sphere: 'dumbing down' is another term for 'making accessible'" (2005: 67).

This approach to understanding these films – based on a sympathetic regard for popular culture and its commercial influences – offers a number of benefits. It asks us

to take the popularity of these films seriously, acknowledging that, regardless of the commercial realities of contemporary media production, the success of any media product, "can only be sustained if they do articulate something of what the majority of the people identify as in their interest and reflecting their view of the world" (Conboy 2002: 15).

Nevertheless, the conclusion drawn here is not that commercialised culture can be simply re-cast as popular culture. Critics of this "populist narrative" often note that there is a tendency for these accounts to exude a "naïve confidence that highly capitalized mass media can be defended and celebrated as 'popular culture'" (Warner 2005: 50; see also Curran 2002; Storey 2006). Clearly, there is a deep ambiguity about popular media, in which commercial imperatives, audience demands, and the public service ideals of the media can be seen as either complementary or conflicting (see Corner 2009). Arguably, the greatest virtue of the views covered in this section is that they all, in different ways, encourage closer examination of how these films were actually received and interpreted by the public, rather than judging them according to a set of pre-existing standards about what the media should do.

As argued above, all three perspectives discussed – the *corrective to the news media*, *corrosive of real debate* and *popularising politics* – can be folded back onto larger ideas surrounding the media's role within society, the influence of politics and the market, and different ways of understanding popular culture. The contradictions between the various interpretations of these films, in turn, reflect the disagreements and dispute that exist within contemporary understandings of media. The purpose of this discussion has not been to isolate one particular perspective as being better than

the others; on the contrary, each perspective, despite certain shortcomings, has considerable merit.

To recap: it is important to contextualise the emergence of popular political documentaries within a consideration of the broader media environment particularly that of the news media with which the documentary shares much in common. However, while these films often style themselves as a response to the shortcomings of the news media, they are part of this same commercialised environment and the changes sweeping other media forms can be identified within these films as well. Finally, the popularity of these films needs to be taken seriously – we need to ask how, and in what ways, these texts can be regarded as popular, given the ambiguity attached to such a term.

Evaluations of the popular political documentary can ultimately be read as attempts to characterise their contribution to public knowledge. Some view their input positively, others negatively. The preceding discussion has highlighted the complexity that lie within and between these various perspectives on the popular political documentary. It has also shown how these ideas can be linked to much broader theories and debates within media studies. While all these perspectives inform the arguments and research that follow, they will, for the most part, remain on the periphery. As noted at the start of this chapter, this thesis aims to situate the study of these films within a broader understanding of a media environment undergoing some profound changes. Simply put, this context of change needs to be understood before we can advance our understanding of these films and how they might relate to broader ideas about the media and society. As will be argued below, changes occurring across the media

environment encourage us to reconsider how the media works and its broader place within our culture. Accordingly, they also encourage us to think about popular political documentaries in a different way as well.

SOME NEW PERSPECTIVES: CHAOS AND CONVERGENCE

Cultural chaos is a term McNair uses to describe the complex, unpredictable and *chaotic* flow of information that characterises contemporary news media (1998; 2003a; 2006). Among the causes of this new chaotic environment, McNair cites technological innovations that have increased the volume, speed and reach of global communication flows (2003a: 550). The internet and satellite technology have been especially prominent in this regard. Indeed, it has been estimated that

> the world's total yearly production of print, film, optical and magnetic content would require roughly 1.5 billion gigabytes of storage. This is the equivalent of 250 megabytes per person for each man, woman and child on earth – every year! (Lyman and Varian qtd in Lanham 2006: 7)

Accordingly, McNair argues that we now inhabit an information environment of unprecedented size and complexity, "as different from the Cold War era of the late twentieth century as that period in turn was from the coffee house culture of early modern Europe" (2006: 105). One significant consequence here is that it has become much harder to control the flow of information due to an abundance of media outlets. As John B. Thompson has argued, the information environment of today is "more intensive, more extensive and less controllable than it was in the past" (2005: 48).

Secondly, McNair cites "the collapse of social deference toward elites in every walk of life," which has "opened up the public sphere to private concerns, and exposed elites to new forms of public accountability" (2003a: 550). As an example of this, he

contrasts the complicity of American political journalists during the Kennedy presidency who kept JFK's "hyperactive sex life" a secret, with the contemporary period where the private lives of all public figures – from Bill Clinton to Silvio Berlusconi – are considered fair game (2006: 11).

Related to this point, McNair argues that the end of the Cold War has led to a "global ideological realignment" in which the old divisions between East and West, capitalist and socialist, left and right, hold less sway as the world instead confronts a range of "ethnic, nationalist and religious conflicts" (2003a: 549). As Andrew Rojecki has argued in a similar fashion: "The collapse of the Soviet empire eliminated a once reliable template for understanding foreign events and for framing media coverage of foreign policy" (2002: 153). This has implications for the ways in the media covers political conflicts of various descriptions, arguably expanding the field of permissible voices that might once have been cast outside what Daniel Hallin (1986) has dubbed the "sphere of legitimate controversy."

Finally, McNair argues that the media has entered a hyper-competitive era, where the pressure to out-do each other in a crowded marketplace encourages them to "deal in the new, the cutting edge, the transgressive, no matter who is involved, and no matter at what cost to public confidence in the institutions of traditional authority" (2003a: 550). As Peter Dahlgren also observes, without necessarily supporting McNair's vision in its entirety: "a definitive aspect of the contemporary media world is the intensifying competition for attention – between genres (e.g., sports or news) as well as between media forms (e.g., broadcast radio or the Internet)" (2009: 35).

Stark evidence of this transgressive and competitive aspect of contemporary media can be found in the ways that certain media forms come to occupy different media platforms and the way they interact with each other. A film, for example, is now commonly released with books, magazines, websites, computer games and other accompanying material. At the same time, audiences of these texts can comment publicly about them, or share, download and 'rip' parts of the film to produce their own media, which they can, in turn, publish via digital technologies and the internet. These developments fuel Henry Jenkins' (2006) theory of "convergence culture" which describes the changing state of contemporary media. Jenkins argues that "in the world of media convergence, every important story gets told, every brand gets sold, and every consumer gets courted across multiple media platforms" (2006: 3).

The comments above highlight how convergence is in many ways a corporate-driven, profit-oriented process. As Graeme Turner has noted, the power of many of today's transnational media conglomerates such as News Corporation and the Walt Disney Company are "built on a pattern of diversifying from their base in one media form across many platforms" (Turner 2004: 32). Technological changes have eased the way for media franchises to be built across multiple media, from the cinema to the DVD extras, to the magazine promotions, tourism tie-ins, video games, merchandise and so on. Such processes enhance a text's visibility which, as noted in the introduction, has important commercial and political ramifications.

It is important to note here that convergence has a 'bottom-up' quality as well. Henry Jenkins (2006) argues that convergence culture relies on the participation of audiences and the power they bring to the selection, modification and, at times, creation, of

media content. While acknowledging the technological and corporate contexts of convergence, Jenkins maintains that this trend also "represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" (2006: 3).

The net result of the changes described in these theories of chaos and convergence is that of a media environment in which many of the established ideas for understanding the media need to be re-assessed, if not discarded. McNair, for example, proposes that we do away with approaches to studying media that take, as a starting point, the position that the media characteristically work to manipulate or control the masses on behalf of elites. He argues that:

> While the desire for control of the news agenda, and for definitional power in the journalistic construction of meaning, are powerful and ever-present, not least in a time of war and perceived global crisis, the capacity of elite groups to wield it effectively is more limited than it has been since the emergence of the news media in the sixteenth century. (McNair 2006: 4)

Within such a perspective, the emergence of popular political documentaries is explained through the permissibility of dissent due to both the decline of deference to elites and a hyper-competitive media marketplace which "cares not what you say, as long as there is someone prepared to pay to hear you say it" (McNair 2006: 91). Indeed, McNair regularly uses examples like the career of Michael Moore and the film *Super Size Me* as evidence supporting his views on cultural chaos and the emergence of a "counter-cultural marketplace" (2006: 90).

Chaos, Convergence and Interaction

One consequence of the changes outlined above is the increasing tendency for different media forms to interact. McNair argues that this era of chaos is marked by "dissolutions" in which the "boundaries between journalism and not-journalism, between information and entertainment, objectivity and subjectivity, truth and lies" are dissolving (2006: 11). This idea of "dissolution" can also be read as a trend towards interaction. This interaction occurs on the level of genre, where we see various 'hybrid' forms of media emerging, such as 'infotainment', reality television, docu-dramas, news-based comedy shows and so on. Such media both contributes to and reflects a much broader intermingling of political culture and popular culture. As will be argued in the case studies that follow, the popular political documentary can be seen as evidence of this hybridising tendency where the tropes of popular media are blended with traditional documentary approaches while political advocacy is presented as mainstream entertainment.

Meanwhile, the technological and cultural changes associated with convergence represent a coming together of different media texts, different media forms and different media industries (see Bainbridge 2008). Here we find interaction facilitated and encouraged through the commercially driven and consumer-driven forces that drive convergence. In relation to popular political documentaries, we are thus encouraged to look at how these forces of convergence enable them to traverse different media spaces and, as argued in the introduction, acquire unprecedented visibility.

Ideas of chaos and convergence introduce an over-riding sense of contingency and indeterminacy to the questions relating to the power and influence of particular media. Within this chaotic system, McNair argues, "power *pools*. It evaporates, dilutes and drains away as environmental conditions change" (2006: 200). One consequence here has been a dilution of the authority of political journalists working for traditional media. Blumler and Gurevitch have argued that "professional political journalists have... been slipping down a salient pecking order – that of access to news time and space for their reports inside their media organs" (2005: 108). Among the reasons for this, they cite the increasing competition and diversity between media which means 'serious' political coverage must now compete for market share with a range of other formats, genres and journalisms (2005: 108).

Significantly, they argue that the field of "professional mediators" when it comes to political communication has broadened out beyond professional political journalists:

> The big players of political journalism no longer command the field they once dominated so prominently. They are now jostled by many new and less inhibited makers and breakers of news, sources of commentary and investigative pursuers and purveyors of scandal in talk shows, tabloids and internet websites. (Blumler & Gurevitch 2005: 109)

Considered within a chaotic media system in which power is fluid, we can see that the conditions described by Blumler and Gurevitch represent a draining of power *away* from these traditional sources of political meaning and authority. In turn, we have the increased prominence of "entertainers and popular culture professionals in the political arena... who come from the entertainment side of the industry, whose celebrityhood provides them with considerable clout" (2005: 109).

Not only do these ideas help explain the emergence of popular political documentaries, they also provide clues as to how we might understand their power to contribute to and influence public knowledge, and their power to engage other forms of media, in this case, the press. The suggestion here is that these texts are powerful in the ways in which they influence the formation of public knowledge both in opposition to, and in tandem with, the news media. This is not to suggest that the news media has completely lost its capacity to communicate meaningfully and influentially about political issues; it just means it now shares the stage with a diverse range of other media, of which the popular political documentary is one.

The study of popular political documentaries therefore represents an opportunity to bring together the insights and ideas of cultural chaos and cultural convergence in a focused and empirical fashion. According to Simon Cottle, the validity of chaos, or any other theory of media, "need[s] to be put to empirical test and refined, revised and possibly rejected on the basis of their analytical explanatory purchase on the contemporary media field" (2009: 42). McNair likewise argues that the theory of chaos needs to be applied to research concerned with "the evolving information content of journalism" (applied loosely here to include the documentary) including notions of quality and influence (2006: 205). On the latter he writes of the need to understand how online sources (particularly blogs)

> 'infect' and become absorbed into the mainstream of globalised news culture... It should be a part of the research agenda of the sociology of cultural chaos to plot and monitor these memetic contagions as they spread virus-like around the world (McNair 2006: 205).

What is applicable to the study of blogs is also applicable to the study of popular political documentaries, insofar as their engagement with and absorption into global news culture should be monitored to help understand these new media dynamics. The

idea of magnetic media presented in this thesis offers a way of understanding the relationship between two distinct media forms, and the ways in which certain media texts attract the attention and interest of other media, before being absorbed and 'taken up' by the broader news culture.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has reviewed some of the major perspectives used to explain the emergence of popular political documentaries. Some have viewed their emergence as a necessary and valuable response to the shortcomings of the news media; others have interpreted them as further evidence of media decline; whereas others still have lauded the ways in which they make political issues entertaining, accessible and engaging. As shown above, all these perspectives can be linked to broader ideas about the media and its role within society. Usefully, across each perspective, we can find an encouragement to consider the emergence of these films within the broader media environment in which they are produced and consumed.

However, if we accept that such a context is necessary, then we must also be mindful of the dramatic changes which have transformed the media landscape in recent decades. These changes, described in terms of chaos and convergence, can both partially explain the emergence of these films, while also emphasising the need to consider how these films interacted with the broader media environment. Ultimately, the contribution popular political documentaries make to public knowledge occurred across and through this complex media landscape. To fully understand the films, we need to look at how they interacted with this broader environment. The following

chapter will pick up on this theme by developing an approach to analysing the interaction between popular political documentaries and the Australian press.

CHAPTER 2

DOCUMENTARIES, THE PRESS AND THE PUBLIC: THEORISING INTERACTION

In a profile appearing in *Vanity Fair*, a publicist for Michael Moore explained the role of the *Fahrenheit 9/11* "war room" in the days and weeks surrounding its release. Its job, he said, was to ensure that "virtually every day *Fahrenheit 9/11* did something to create news and drive the coverage in a way that defined the movie on our terms and occupied significant media real estate" (Lehane qtd in Bachrach 2005: 240). The publicist in question was Chris Lehane, a former consultant for the Clinton administration and, during the weeks and months surrounding its release, *Fahrenheit 9/11* did indeed generate immense media hype, not just in America but around the world too.

As noted in the previous chapter, today's media environment is characterised by new forms of media and new forms of political communication, of which the popular political documentary are prime examples. Blumler and Gurevitch argue that a key focus of research within this new environment should consider how the "dominant political and media institutions... adapt their offerings" to "perhaps accommodate or challenge these new forms of communication" (2005: 105). As seen in the paragraph above, this interaction with dominant media institutions was especially significant for

popular political documentaries. This chapter is about bringing these interactions between the films and other media, particularly the press, into a clearer focus.

In light of the above, it will be necessary to first of all add some depth to our understanding of both the documentary and the press. This chapter will therefore outline some significant aspects of each domain while also providing a context for considering the interaction that occurs between them. There is much ground to be covered here including: further discussion of some core documentary features, an overview of ways in which we can understand the press, theorising the interaction between the press and popular political documentaries and a discussion of how these interactions relate to broader issues concerning the media and the public sphere.

THE DOCUMENTARY TEACHER

Documentaries have been described as sitting "somewhere between the evening News *[sic]* and reality TV" (O'Regan 2003). This description aptly situates the documentary between the worlds of news media and popular entertainment. The emergence of popular political documentaries has sharpened awareness of this 'in-between' space that the documentary occupies. This is not to suggest that contemporary media can be neatly divided into distinct categories, with information (news media) appearing on one side of the spectrum, and entertainment on the other. As has been argued forcefully across a range of works (see Gray 2006; Harrington 2008; Hartley 1999; van Zoonen 2005), such distinctions are difficult to sustain and have often been used to denigrate or de-value certain entertainment-based media in relation to what are

perceived to be more valuable and informative genres or mediums (for example, news and current affairs compared to drama; the newspaper compared to the television).

One thing we can say with certainty about the media is that in can be used and understood in diverse ways. Liesbet van Zoonen's (2005) study of internet forums and discussion boards showed how popular television shows can generate critical reflection on politics and citizenship. On the flipside, Bird and Dardenne (1988) have illustrated the mythic and narrative elements of news and current affairs, suggesting that they do more than just present information. Meanwhile, the rise of the 'infotainment' and 'reality' genres continues to blur distinctions between different types of programming. These examples remind us of the need to be cautious when making general claims about the characteristics of any particular media genre. As Mittell argues, genres are always "contingent and transitory, shifting over time and taking on new definitions, meanings, and values within differing contexts" (qtd in Gray 2006: 29-30). Nevertheless, there are some relatively stable and identifiable features of the documentary which warrant some discussion here.

The documentary occupies a space in our culture which marks it off as a particular source of public knowledge which explicitly tells us something about the world we live in. As Bill Nichols argues, "documentaries show us situations and events that are recognizably part of a realm of shared experience: the historical world as we know and encounter it, or as we believe others to encounter it" (1991: ix-x). In contrast to other genres of media, documentaries, like journalism, are inflected towards the *non*-fictional. In doing so, documentaries often exhibit a distinctly didactic quality. According to Stuart Cunningham (2000) the documentary is a teacher. He borrows

this idea from John Hartley's (1999) writing on television to argue that the teaching undertaken by the documentary can be understood as "loving to influence others" (Cunningham 2000: 42).

It should be noted here that Hartley's writing about television's 'teacherly' qualities, from which Cunningham draws, emphasises that such an idea is not about "the intentions of its producers or consumers, much less the ostensible purpose of TV companies and channels," rather it is "a social, historical view of television and of usage, seeking to interpret, after the event, what has been done with television in modern/postmodern societies" (1999: 41). If one is to apply these ideas to the documentary (as Cunningham does) then it must be acknowledged that the documentary (as a genre), unlike television as defined by Hartley, is much more explicit about the teaching it seeks to engage in. As noted documentary film-maker Barbara Kopple describes her profession:

> Documentary film-makers create unforgettable and entertaining films that introduce us to people we would never have known, or show us a different side of people we thought we knew already. Great nonfiction filmmakers take us halfway around the world, or maybe just the other side of the tracks, but either way, it's an experience that can change us forever. (Kopple 2005: viii)

Perhaps the most useful aspect of Hartley's theories about television's teaching when applied to the documentary is that they call for a "rethinking of the importance of 'distribution' – feeling the 'width' of actual teacherly contact with people" (1999: 45). Thus we are encouraged to not only consider the content of documentaries, their form or their politics, but also, and perhaps more importantly, their popularity – the amount of people who actually view them. This clearly has ramifications for how we consider popular political documentaries which, as argued already, rank among the most viewed and the most visible documentaries of all time.

Teaching Citizenship

According to Pat Aufderheide, documentaries "are part of the media that help us understand not only our world but our role in it, that shape us as public actors" (2007: 5). This latter notion of "public actors" signals the link that can be made between the documentary and notions of citizenship. Much of the rhetoric surrounding the documentary emphasises (whether overtly or not) its capacity to provide for what John Grierson called "a more imagined and considered citizenship" (qtd in Hardy 1966: 185). It is worth touching briefly upon how this thesis will approach this relationship between the documentary and ideas of citizenship.

According to Lewis, Inthorn and Wahl-Jorgensen (2005: 8) the way citizens are represented in the media "helps to shape what it *means* to be a citizen in a democracy".[9] It is worth stressing from the outset that citizenship is a nebulous and contested concept that, in general terms, refers to a range of rights and responsibilities which both permit and regulate the way people participate in the social, cultural and political life of their community (see Craig 2004; Wahl-Jorgensen 2008). There is an enormous variety of ideas about what these rights and responsibilities are or which ones are most important (what we might call 'discourses of citizenship'), and thus we can often find marked differences in the way citizenship is represented within the media. Emily West (2008) for example, has looked at the different ways in which citizenship has been represented in American health-care debates, with some representations linking it to an individualised, consumerist model of citizenship while others emphasised a more collective and publically minded vision.

[9] These authors make this point specifically in relation to the news media. It should be noted that many scholars have argued that such ideas apply to diverse media forms, not just the news media (see Jones 2008, van Zoonen 2005). This thesis follows this broader approach to analysing the relationship between citizenship and the media.

In focusing on the relationship between the popular political documentary and the news media, this thesis takes the position that both these forms can represent politics and citizenship in particularly influential ways. While they are not the only forms of media that perform this role (see Jones 2008), they nevertheless occupy a certain status that needs to be acknowledged. As seen in the previous chapter, the frequent criticisms directed at the documentary and the news media for failing to live up to their public responsibilities offer telling indicators of the cultural significance attached to these forms. The following paragraphs will build on this understanding of the news media.

NEWS MEDIA AS AN INTERPRETIVE AUDIENCE

The news media are unique. According to Michael Schudson the news can be thought of as "public knowledge" insofar as it "constructs a symbolic world that has a kind of priority, a certification of legitimate importance," that, through its accessibility, ultimately "becomes the property of all of us" (1995: 33).[10] There is a neat fit here between the desire of this research to understand how popular political documentaries contribute to public knowledge, and an approach which makes the news a prime site of analysis. If the news really is a form of public knowledge, and a particularly important one at that, then it is important for this research to have a clear understanding of how the news media and popular political documentaries interact.

[10] John Corner (1998) uses the term "public knowledge project" to refer to a domain of media reception research which focuses on the media's provision of news and information.

As stated already, a particular focus of this research is to look at how popular political documentaries interacted with the Australian press. The press, of course, represents only one form of news media and, if recent prognoses are anything to go by, it may even be an endangered one (see *Economist* 2006). Nevertheless, as stated in the introduction it still plays a significant role within public life. According to Geoffrey Craig, Australian newspapers "remain a mass medium of tremendous political influence," which continue to "... perform a central role in setting the news agenda and providing in-depth coverage of issues and events" (2004: 90-1). Aside from this role, the newspaper also provides insights into the state of knowledge and sense-making practices within a community (Hall 1975; Hartley 1996). It can therefore provide a particular archive of the ideas, concerns and perspectives that are prevalent at a given point in time. The following paragraphs will further refine this understanding of the cultural position of the press.

In the introduction to his book *Media and Political Conflict: News from the Middle-East*, Gadi Wolfsfeld uses the evocative metaphor of the gladiatorial arena to describe how protagonists in various political conflicts come together to struggle and dispute one another in the public domain (1997: 1). The arena is often used as a metaphor to describe a place in which a public comes together. However, in this instance the crowd is not the public, it is the news media:

> The crowd who actually view the battles is surprisingly small. It is composed of professional storytellers (sometimes called journalists) who are responsible for turning even the most monotonous of contests into exciting drama. (Wolfsfeld 1997: 1)

Wolfsfeld's work here concerns not only how news from political conflicts in the Middle East is framed, but also how the various protagonists act in order to secure attention and favourable coverage. It forms part of a research tradition interested in

news sources (see Cottle 2003; Manning 2001; Schlesinger 1990) which posits the news media as a site of influence, but also as a site to be influenced.

The study of news sources is fundamentally concerned with questions about "the media's relation to wider structures and systems of power" (Cottle 2003: 3). It concentrates on the dynamics of who gets into the news and on what terms. There is a dual focus then, not only on the content of news, but also on the strategies and activities deployed behind the scenes which help structure news output. For example, studies of environmental politics in the media often focus on the battles between politicians and protest groups (e.g. Greenpeace) to see who can secure the most favourable coverage (Allan et al. 2001). Whether it be press conferences, protest marches, press releases or stunts there is an explicit goal in much of this activity to recruit the news media as an audience (see Scalmer 2002). From the outset, it should be noted that this idea of the news media being positioned like an audience is not intended to overlook or downplay the complex wide-ranging factors that shape journalistic behaviour. On the contrary, the following paragraphs will explore how a diverse range of influences shape the way journalists respond to, and interpret, the world around them.

This concept of the news media as an audience forms a basic part of public relations practice. Public relations text books list the news media as one of its "traditional publics" and thus a key focus for much public relations activity (Guth & Marsh 2009). This activity is driven by the belief that the news media can be an integral ally for achieving certain political, cultural or financial outcomes. The basic premise here is that the news media, having been the initial audience, can then communicate to a

broader audience in a way that will be favourable to the party (individual, group, political or corporate) in question.

Barbie Zelizer (1993) has used the term "interpretive community" to describe the culture of journalists and how they develop norms, behaviours and perspectives related to their profession. The term, borrowed from literary studies (Fish 1980) and media research into audiences (Anderson & Lindlof 1988), provides an invaluable means for understanding how journalists behave as an audience. Zelizer argues that journalists share stories about their profession, about its history, and about their role in society as a way of developing a community that then guides their interpretation of prevailing events (1993: 223). According to Fish, interpretive communities develop strategies of interpretation which, in turn, "determine the shape of what is read" (1980: 171). What this means is that how journalists respond to a particular event or issue is in some way pre-determined by prevailing senses of how events should be interpreted and communicated. A basic example here is the fundamental journalistic process involving selection, interpretation and emphasis in which a limited number of events and issues are deemed worthy of coverage within a given news cycle (see Hall 1981). There are links here with ideas of news values and framing which will be discussed further in the following chapter.

Alongside these observations, it should also be noted that journalism is seen by many to have become more opinion-based or interpretive, as opposed to relying on just facts and straight reportage (APC 2006; McNair 2000; Franklin 2008). According to the Australian Press Council's State of the News Print Media Report of 2006, "the blurring of fact and opinion," was one of five major trends for that year, caused in part

by the increased intermingling of journalism and commentary where "[f]ew by-lined writers can resist insinuating their own perspectives" (APC 2006). Focusing more on the press in the United Kingdom, Brian McNair refers to the "remarkable expansion" of what he calls "*the interpretive moment* in the news cycle... where evaluation of, and opinion about either the substance, the style, the policy content or the process of political affairs replaces the straight reportage of new information" (2000: 61; emphasis in original). Such arguments supplement this understanding of the news media as an interpretive audience, notwithstanding the criticisms that such developments often encounter.

One final point to make here is that journalists, apart from being media producers, are also, like the rest of us, media consumers. Those who would write about popular political documentaries were part of the audience – whether of the films themselves, or of the hype and publicity surrounding them. This is particularly true of those journalists who wrote commentaries, editorials or other analytical accounts who, according to Gamson and Modigliani (1989) represent a type of journalist (including cartoonists and opinion columnists) who:

> ... observe and react to the same media accounts, already partly framed and presented in a context of meaning, that are available to other readers and viewers. In their commentary on an issue, they frequently attempt to articulate and crystallize a set of responses that they hope or assume will be shared by their invisible audience. (1989: 9)

Taken together, the above points illustrate how we can think of the news media as an interpretive audience. Such an idea drives this study's interest in how the press responded to popular political documentaries. This press coverage represents a widely shared and accessible archive of public interpretations of these films and their place within our culture. However, before we can start analysing the coverage, it is

necessary to look deeper at the processes in which the interpretations of journalists are presented to media consumers as news. Therefore, the following paragraphs will offer an overview of some key ways of understanding news production.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE NEWS MEDIA

Decades of research have resulted in radically different interpretations of the news media's role in society and the forces that shape their existence. To offer only a brief summary of these perspectives, the following discussion will borrow from Michael Schudson's (2005) four categories for understanding the sociology of news: the *economic* organisation of news, the *political* context of news-making, the *social* organisation of news work and *cultural* approaches. These four areas of concern represent four different ways of understanding how the news media is produced. This overview of factors influencing news production will lend nuance and depth to our understanding of the relationship between the press and popular political documentaries.

The economic approach often focuses on questions of media ownership, media concentration and the commodified nature of news production. It can focus on both the structures behind the media which influence its output or it can focus on the content of the media which, as is often argued, can be used to support the interests of the economically powerful (McChesney 2008; Richardson 2007). Often the study of economic influences is combined with a focus on the political – hence the so-called political economy approach to studying media (see Herman and Chomsky 1994;

Murdock & Golding 2005). However, Schudson (2005) has argued that there is sufficient difference between the two domains to treat them separately.

The political approach focuses on how the activities of the state impinge upon media activity. This is most pronounced in authoritarian states where media freedom is tightly controlled by the government. Nevertheless, even in liberal democracies, the power of the state to influence media behaviour through, for example, excessive 'spin' is often the subject of critique (Burton 2007; Knightley 2000). Alternatively, in so-called "weak states", the media's freedom can be threatened by a *lack* of state power whereby the media is threatened by criminal or corrupt activity both within and outside of government (Waisbord 2000 cited in Schudson 2005: 180-1).

The social approach to understanding the news media focuses on the professional world inhabited by journalists and the relationships and interactions that influence their work. A key interest here is on the interactions between journalists and their sources. As noted earlier, this approach is marked by a concern with who gets into the news and on what terms. A number of studies in this area have found that the news routinely offers privileged access to a society's elite – whether they are government officials, politicians or business leaders (Hall et al. 1978). On the other hand, more recent research has found that relationships between journalists and sources are much more complex than previously thought (Cottle 2003; Manning 2001). Indeed, a number of studies have illustrated the ways in which marginal groups in society can, under certain circumstances, access the news agenda and receive sympathetic coverage (Anderson 1997; DeLuca & Peeples 2002).

Cultural approaches to the study of the news media can focus both on the content of the news or the broader cultural context in which journalism is produced and consumed. Of key interest here is the constructed nature of news, a recognition that journalism doesn't merely report objectively on reality but rather constructs a particular view which relies to varying degrees on symbolism, myths, narrative, stereotypes and discourses to convey meaning (Schudson 2005: 186-90). This applies not only to the actual output of journalists but also to how they behave as a particular type of community and how they regard their own profession.

Despite the range of approaches listed above, the precise nature of the news media remains elusive. As Zelizer notes, "we still have not found a way to account for journalism's internal messiness and flexible contours" (2005: 198). She proposes that we understand journalism as a culture; that is "a complex web of meanings, rituals, conventions and symbol systems" (2005: 198). This complex web is ever-changing and thus we are encouraged to re-evaluate our understanding of how journalism is shaped each time we bring it under analytical focus. For example, Zelizer examines the American media's reportage of the Iraq War to demonstrate how the culture of journalism at this time was influenced by, among other matters, issues of patriotism, new technological developments, concerns over physical safety and a diversity of media outlets (2005). None of these matters fit neatly into the four perspectives outlined above. This emphasis on the culture of journalism therefore brings an element of contingency and flexibility to our understanding of how the news media operate. It is also a view which, significantly for this study, encourages us to look at how journalism interacts with, and is influenced by, other forms of media.

The above paragraphs have summarised some key approaches to understanding the production of news. As discussed already, this interest in the news media is driven by a desire to understand how they interpreted popular political documentaries. This, in turn, can help us understand on a broader scale how these films contributed to public knowledge. Although brief, the above discussion has illustrated the range of influences shaping news production and it is now worth moving on to consider other issues relevant to this relationship between popular political documentaries and the press.

MEANINGS AND INTERACTION

The above paragraphs looked at the interaction between popular political documentaries and the press from a broad institutional perspective. It is now worth tightening the focus somewhat to consider how these interactions impact on the way we, as media consumers, encounter these films and the coverage that surrounds them. It is here that we come to consider ideas of inter-textuality.

Inter-textuality is a term which calls attention to the relationships between texts, and the way media audiences navigate these relationships. The term itself has a varied history, inspired by Bahktin's notion of dialogic texts (texts in conversation) in the 1920s and taken up with enthusiasm by various post-modern scholars from the 1970s onwards (Bakhtin 1981; Fuery & Mansfield 2000). According to Gray (2006: 3) inter-textuality has become "an increasingly popular buzzword" across a range of analytical perspectives – whether it be the analysis of specific media texts, or in the broader

analysis of culture and the individual's place within it (see Fuery & Mansfield 2000: 68). Some clarification of its use in this thesis is therefore needed.

Inter-textuality represents a challenge to traditional methods of analysing and understanding texts. Couldry (2000) and Gray (2006) have both observed how traditional literary modes of textual analysis, in which significant novels, poems and other works of literature were analysed, "have a long history of fetishizing the text as a solitary, pristinely autonomous object" (Gray 2006: 19). Such an approach has influenced writing on the documentary where, as Corner argues, a "film studies model" has been prominent in which the filmic text is often treated in a self-contained fashion (2000: 683). While such an approach has merit, it remains far removed from the actual ways in which texts are encountered within our social world. For example, when viewers sat down to watch the documentary *Sicko* they did so presumably having had some exposure to its director Michael Moore – a prominent figure in film and television for close to two decades. Indeed, as will be argued later in this thesis, Moore's celebrity status, derived from the success of his earlier films and television shows, immediately present a range of range of possible meanings: he can be admired for his brazen humour and social concern, or he can be reviled for his smarminess, among a host of possibilities.

Likewise, as Moore discusses the state of American health care, viewers may be reminded of news reports or magazine articles detailing this issue. Undoubtedly, the subject of 'health care' as a political issue would provoke varied responses across different national contexts, where respective governments provide differing levels of support in this area. Alternatively, other meanings might be triggered by the perceived

correspondence between this film and Moore's earlier films, or in the film's presentation of 9/11 fire fighters – figures imbued with heroism, bravery and sacrifice within a post-9/11 culture. On the other hand, the fact that the film is labelled a 'documentary' might be enough for certain people to decide to watch something else.

The above examples point to one dimension of inter-textuality which looks at the "internal" connections between one text and many others (Couldry 2000: 89). It refers to the various information, ideas and discourses that can inform the production and interpretation of a given text. Alongside these internal connections, there is a need to acknowledge the more overt connections between texts, where they comment or reference each other explicitly, such as in advertising and promotional material, satires and parodies, and journalistic pieces.[11] Returning to the above example, interpretations of *Sicko* were also potentially shaped by promotional material associated with the film alongside reviews and other media pieces which talked about the film directly.

According to Bennett and Woollacott (1987), the idea of a singular 'text', in possession of its own self-contained meanings, is inconceivable once we take on-board the type of scenarios suggested above. The text, they argue, "is never 'there' except in forms in which it is also and always other than 'just itself', always already humming with reading possibilities which derive from outside its covers" (1987: 90-1). They apply such insights to their analysis of James Bond, arguing that the significance and meaning of Bond is not to be found solely within the various novels

[11] This overt dimension of inter-textuality is discussed in different ways. Fiske (1987) refers to "vertical intertextuality" while Couldry (2000: 88-9) draws on Bennett and Woollacott (1987) to limit "inter-textuality" to only those "relations between texts actually established in specific conditions of reading and production."

and films but rather in the meanings that "hover" between the various "texts of Bond" (1987: 91).

Looking at the relationships between these so-called inter-texts, Bennett discusses how texts accumulate layers of meaning as:

> everything which has been written *about* it [a text], everything which has been collected on it, become *[sic]* attached to it – like shells on a rock by the seashore forming a whole incrustation. (qtd in Staiger 1992: 46)

Such ideas have clear implications for the way we understand the relationship between popular political documentaries and the coverage surrounding them. They tie in with the concept of magnetic media where we can observe a range of media texts being attracted to these films and bringing their own particular meanings and interpretations with them. Consequently, the meanings attached to these films extend out beyond the films themselves and beyond the promotional materials to include a diverse range of media.

This idea of texts accumulating layers of meaning has implications for how we understand the process of interpretation. A useful approach here is offered by Jonathan Gray whose concept of "reading through" describes the contingent and ever-changing ways in which texts are interpreted (2006: 32-5). Gray argues that texts are never simply just decoded or interpreted at a particular point in time, rather our understanding of a text changes with time, not only within that initial encounter (which may unfold over a few seconds, hours or days depending on the text), but also as we encounter other texts which, in turn, can produce meanings that alter our interpretation of previous ones. As Gray puts it, "other texts are always there with us as we work our way through a text" (2006: 33). To illustrate this point, Gray recounts

his experience of watching the *Lord of the Rings* films and then re-reading the Tolkien novel, with each text affecting how the other is read and interpreted (2006: 34).

We can actually find tangible evidence of this 'reading through' process whenever we read or watch the news regularly. This is because the news, in many ways, is not new. More commonly, items of news exist as updates of pre-existing stories. With the addition of new information or new perspectives, each update marks a re-presentation, if not a re-interpretation of the subject at hand. What this means is that each item of coverage can be read as evidence of interpretation on the one hand, while also having the potential to shape subsequent interpretations. Here we find 'reading through' carried out in a particularly nuanced and particularly public way.

This discussion of inter-textuality informs this study in two ways. Firstly, as signalled in the preceding paragraph, the news coverage can be analysed as a unique and public process of 'reading through' in which interpretations of these films are 'taken up' within the culture of news and adapted, revised or challenged as they encounter other ideas, information and perspectives. It is worth re-stating here that journalists are consumers as well as producers of news. This study of the interaction between the press and popular political documentaries thus becomes an analysis of unfolding interpretations as well.

Secondly, this coverage itself becomes part of the textual environment that Australian audiences encountered in relation to these films. Of course, in this study we will not be able to know exactly how or in what ways this coverage was incorporated into the interpretive processes of individual audience members – that would depend on an

audience reception study. But we can use this coverage to gain a much better understanding of how these texts contributed to public knowledge, and the more general ways in which they were discussed and interpreted. As Staiger points out, "the popular representation of the reception of a film becomes one of the conditions for its subsequent reception" (1992: 140). Each item of coverage therefore represents evidence of interpretation while also altering the grounds for future interpretations. To borrow from Alan McKee (2003: 90), the coverage comprises an array of "publicly available knowledges" that people can use to understand and interpret these films and the issues they present.

Going Global

Another field of interaction that needs to be considered here is how these films engaged different cultures. As noted in the introduction, the popular political documentary has gone global. This is a neglected point within much of the research on offer concerning these films. For example, Toplin's book-length account of *Fahrenheit 9/11* does note its global reach (2006: 3), but devotes almost all of its analysis to exploring how the film was received and interpreted in America. Likewise, interpretations of *An Inconvenient Truth*'s rhetoric are linked back to distinctly American traditions of environmentalism (Johnson 2009; see also McEnteer 2006). These insights are valuable and also understandable given the films' American origins. However, there is also a need to recognise that these texts became prominent in many other nations as well.

By looking at how these films traversed national boundaries, this research links in with much broader domains of inquiry concerned with the cultural impacts of globalisation. Anthony Giddens has defined globalisation as:

> the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa. This is a dialectical process because such local happenings may move in an obverse direction from the very distanciated relations that shape them. Local transformation is as much part of globalization as the lateral extension of social connections across time and space. (Giddens 1990: 64)

It should be noted that this multi-directional view of globalisation is challenged by those who view it more pessimistically as a revamped form of imperialism in which cultures with political and economic power (i.e. the USA) exert influence over weaker ones (see O'Connor & Griffiths 2006; Thussu 2005). The emergence of popular political documentaries can certainly be cast within this same critical perspective whereby global political issues are given a dominant American inflection. However, as Giddens' definition reminds us, we need to be mindful of the dialectical process of globalisation, where local contexts can bear heavily on the interpretation of foreign cultural products. This has been well recognised within media research with a number of studies showing the complex relationship between global media products and the sites of local consumption (see Ang 1996; Liebes & Katz 1993).

This research's focus on an Australian context does not overlook those aspects of globalisation which have placed enormous strain on the validity and legitimacy of the nation as a cultural category (see Jensen & Miller 1997). However, it should be noted that nations continue to exert considerable cultural power, particularly when it comes to examining media within different national contexts. As James Curran has argued:

> The nation remains an important marker of difference. Nations have different languages, political systems, power structures, cultural traditions, economies, international links and histories. These find continuing expression in the media of different nation states. (2002: 183)

By situating its analysis within an Australian setting, this thesis will not be able to shed light on the myriad ways in which the meanings from these texts traversed the globe. It will, however, provide a specific analysis located in a particular national culture at a particular moment in time. Because of this, the case studies that follow will use the term 'trans-national' more frequently than 'global' to simply acknowledge that these analyses examine just one component of a more global, and thus much broader, flow of meaning related to these films.

INTERACTION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The above paragraphs have engaged with this idea of interaction from a number of different vantage points – from looking at the interaction between two distinct types of media, to the interactions between texts, through to the interaction between different cultures. There is another, perhaps more abstract level upon which these interactions can be assessed. As the following paragraphs will argue, the interaction between popular political documentaries and the press can be read as an interaction between different *spaces* within the public sphere.

The public sphere can be defined as "a constellation of communicative spaces in society that permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates – ideally in an unfettered manner – and also the formation of political will" (Dahlgren 2005: 148). The public sphere is thus viewed as an indispensable component of democratic society – it is the space where people can source information, debate and decide on

that most basic question "what *ought* we do?" (Warren 2002: 177). Today, the media provides the primary resource through which information, ideas and debates are circulated, providing the necessary infrastructure for various communicative spaces to emerge.

Dahlgren's focus on "communicative spaces" valuably sidesteps criticisms of other conceptions of the public sphere (particularly Habermas 1989) which are deemed to privilege certain types of communication, and certain types of media over others (see Fraser 1992; McKee 2005; Warner 2005). The public sphere as a constellation of communicative spaces recognises that all forms of media (not just the news media or the documentary) have a role in contributing to the "circulation of information, ideas, debates" and, the "formation of political will". It also signals that the public sphere is not a unitary space, and while some might prefer the metaphor of public spheres or public sphericules (Gitlin 1998), this notion of communicative spaces adequately conveys the plurality of contemporary publics.

Invoking the concept of the public sphere involves more than just using it in a descriptive sense. As noted by Dahlgren (1991) and others (see DeLuca & Peeples 2002), the concept can, or at least should, be both a category for critique and one that points to the possibility of future democratic enrichment: "The concept of the public sphere must have evocative power, providing us with concrete visions of the democratic society which are enabling rather than disabling" (Dahlgren 1991: 8-9). The theme of interaction resurfaces here insofar as a vibrant public sphere seemingly depends on different communicative spaces actually engaging one another in dialogue and exchange (Cammaerts 2007; Dahlgren 1995, 2009).

Returning to the interaction between popular political documentaries and the press, it is possible to regard such interaction as an encounter between different communicative spaces. The case studies that follow will make this a key focus, looking at how these forms of popular entertainment engaged the spaces of 'hard' news, political commentary and formal politics. It will also look at how these films traversed other spaces as well, from the corporate world to fringe political movements, while still maintaining a firm footing within popular culture.

On this topic of different spaces interacting, Dahlgren (1995) argues for the importance of "a translation mechanism" which can bring different communicative spaces – what he calls the common domain and the advocacy domain – together (1995: 159). The common domain is seen as the home of mainstream culture, shaped by a fluctuating mix of commercial, political and public pressures, while the advocacy domain is conceived as a space where we find more marginal or alternative forms of cultural expression which can often be more closely tied to the everyday interests and concerns of ordinary people. Dahlgren argues that the value of such a domain depends on a "translation mechanism" through which it can "seep into and modify the common domain, transforming – in the longer perspective – the dominant culture itself" (1995: 159).

This focus on a "translation mechanism" implicitly points to the crucial role that both popular culture and the news media can play as sites that encourage dialogue between different communicative spaces. The news media can do this through summoning different perspectives, speakers and identities in relation to a whole range of issues.

Popular culture, meanwhile, can arguably provide what Martin Conboy (2000: 19) has described as "breathing space," a place for experimentation, dissent, and a wider range of permissible points of view than what we find in other cultural domains. This is not to say that this is what the news media and popular culture do all, or even most, of the time. Nevertheless, both domains retain unique abilities to facilitate interaction between different communicative spaces within the public sphere. And, as seen in the previous chapter, changes sweeping the contemporary media environment have increased this tendency towards interaction.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has introduced a range of perspectives from which to consider the interaction between popular political documentaries and the Australian press. Crucial here is a perspective on the press which sees it as an interpretive audience, one that responds to and represents the social world in particularly public ways. This interaction between the films and the press can be seen as an interaction between different media forms, different meanings and different spaces within the public sphere. As will be argued in the case studies that follow, these interactions can be understood through the concept of magnetic media – in which popular political documentaries are able to attract a diverse range of media which, in turn, bring a host of different voices and perspectives into play.

This research's focus on interaction demands a similarly interactive research method – one that can be applied across different media spaces, analysing both texts and contexts. As noted in Chapter One, today's changing media environment demands

research approaches that are flexible and geared towards the empirical. The following chapter will explain how this research will proceed.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCHING POPULAR POLITICAL DOCUMENTARIES

In examining how popular political documentaries contribute to public knowledge, this research moves between three primary points of analysis: the films themselves, the press coverage surrounding the films, and the contexts for both. The method of research outlined below incorporates a trans-national and trans-media perspective that is sensitive to the chaotic and convergent media conditions described in the previous chapters. It draws upon a range of media research techniques including those found within traditions of textual analysis, political economy, the sociology of news (including source analysis) and discourse analysis. What emerges is a broad range of inquiry in which the films share the stage with and are often outshone by events such as wars, elections and droughts. Meanwhile, broader trends shaping political communication, popular culture and contemporary news practice will also command attention.

Although there are some parallels here with documentary studies which focus on their reception (see Corner 1996; Frentz & Rosteck 2009), this study is unique insofar as it brings the analysis of the documentary into a dialogue with the analysis of the news media, utilising tools appropriate to each subject. Such an approach is necessary because, if we accept that the media is more diverse, more connected and less amenable to control than ever before, then we also need methods that are flexible,

inter-connected and able to speak in a range of analytical languages. As media forms travels across different platforms, so too must our analyses of these media.

THE CASE STUDY

This thesis involves three case studies focusing on *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Super Size Me* and *An Inconvenient Truth*. Each film offers a different example of the popular political documentary in action and helps to explain in broader terms how texts of this nature contribute to public knowledge. The case study approach presents the opportunity to apply theories and concepts to specific examples. As Lilie Chouliaraki argues, "examples... stand in a relationship of tension to theory. They do not claim to articulate an eternal truth nor to have 'universal' applicability, but neither are they random" (2006: 10).

As suggested above, case studies are not about articulating eternal truths but they can provide outlets into more general observations and 'mapping out' of the broader media field. Therefore, while the research that follows focuses on popular political documentaries, there are opportunities to consider the links between these findings and broader media trends.

Before introducing the different elements of the case studies, it should be noted that this research began with what Stuart Hall (1966: 15) calls "a long preliminary soak" in the materials – the films and the coverage – which, in turn, informed the nature of analyses and the particular methods utilised. Therefore, while each case study shares the same loose structure, the precise method of research will vary across each case study. For example, with the *Super Size Me* chapter, a content analysis of obesity

coverage was included to gain some insight into whether the film might have impacted upon the amount of obesity-related stories within the media. However, such analysis was less useful in relation to *Fahrenheit 9/11* which was already dealing with a major international news story that had its coverage influenced by a vast array of factors. Trying to identify permutations in coverage of the Iraq War as a result of *Fahrenheit 9/11* seemed, in this way, rather pointless.

These slight variations of method across each case study will be reflected in their presentation. Each case study moves from an analysis of the text, through to a consideration of context and concludes with an examination of the press coverage surrounding each film. However, there will be occasions where features of the press coverage will be discussed during the analysis of the film, and vice versa. This will lend greater fluency and clarity to certain arguments which might otherwise become lost or repetitive within a more rigid structure.

ANALYSING THE FILMS

According to John Hartley, texts can be treated like "forensic evidence" in which the discursive politics of society can be investigated in an empirical form (1992: 29). A similar perspective informs Norman Fairclough's understanding of textual analysis and the ways in which the meanings in texts can be mapped onto broader social meanings (1992, 1995). Methodologically, this requires a focus that goes beyond the text, not only into the realm of inter-textuality discussed earlier, but also to "the processes of text production and text consumption" and "the social and cultural goings-on which the communicative event [text] is a part of" (Fairclough 1995: 57).

Therefore the analysis of these films extends to consider the broader social environment in which they are circulated – of which discourses are a constitutive part – as well as the cultural, economic and political contexts of their production, distribution and consumption.

A close textual analysis of each film is inspired by McKee's definition of textual analysis as an "educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of the text" (2003: 90). A key issue here is to identify the arguments that drive each film's political critique. Given the didactic nature of each film, the political messages offered are often quite explicit, so the analysis of this aspect will be reasonably straightforward. Of course, attention will be paid to the various rhetorical strategies used in these films particularly in the way they address their audience. As noted previously, the documentary has traditionally been aligned with the project of providing resources for citizenship. Therefore, each case study will analyse how these films encourage spectators to understand the world around them and their own place within it.

This focus on how the films address their audience will correspond with an analysis of the relationships between these texts, popular culture and politics. Therefore, those elements of the text which connect in some way with aspects of either political culture or popular culture will be given closer attention. Some recurrent themes include: performative politics, the power of celebrity, the use of spectacle, and popular forms of symbolism and narrative.

There are, of course, some limitations with the type of research described thus far. By focusing on the text itself, we are left with little insight into how audiences actually used and interpreted these films. As Justin Lewis has argued:

> The question that should be put to textual analysis that purports to tell us how a cultural product 'works' in contemporary culture is almost embarrassingly simple: where's the evidence? Without evidence, everything is pure speculation. (qtd in Couldry 2000a: 8)

Indeed, a textual analysis of *An Inconvenient Truth* cannot tell us how individuals actually interpreted the text. This is why the purpose of such analysis has been formulated as "an educated guess", as to "the most likely interpretations" of a given text (McKee 2003: 90).

The investigation of how individuals interpret texts often underpins various kinds of audience research (Ruddock 2007). Audience research certainly has many benefits, especially in the insights it provides into how ordinary viewers or readers construct meaning from specific texts or groups of texts (see Harrington 2008, Gray 2006). However, given this study's interest in how popular political documentaries engaged other media, as opposed to how the engaged individual viewers, an alternative research agenda was pursued.

As suggested earlier, the news media can be regarded as an interpretive audience of sorts within which we can find further evidence of how these films were interpreted and discussed within a community. Highly contextualised and shaped by the conditions of news production and journalism culture, the press coverage surrounding the films nevertheless presents an accompanying site of analysis which allows for a richer understanding of the 'cultural work' done by these films.

ANALYSING THE COVERAGE

The method employed here incorporates elements of both quantitative and qualitative approaches to studying media content. Once again, the contexts of production and distribution are vital here and these issues will be dealt with in a separate section to follow.

Quantitative News Analysis

According to Deacon, Pickering, Golding and Murdock (1999: 116), content analysis can be used "to quantify salient and manifest features of a large number of texts and the statistics used to make broader inferences about the processes and politics of representation". It is employed in this research to gain a quantitative measure of the amount of coverage that each film received, allowing comparisons with coverage of other issues, as well as providing a sample upon which a more qualitative analysis can proceed.

The content analysis involves three Australian daily newspapers, *The Australian*, *The Age* and the *Herald Sun*. As will be explained later, these newspapers were chosen as a representative sample of the Australian press more broadly. Digital archives were used to access the coverage (Newstext for *The Australian* and the *Herald Sun*; Fairfax Digital, *The Age and Good Weekend Quarterly on CD Rom* and the EBSCOhost Australia/New Zealand Reference Centre for *The Age*[12]). The search terms employed were the names of the films and the name of the director (or, in the case of *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore). For example, the analysis for *Fahrenheit 9/11* was

[12] Some complications involved in sourcing archives for *The Age*

based on the results derived from a search for: *fahrenheit 9/11* OR michael moore. Other searches were used for the purpose of comparison including, for example, searches for "obesity", "obesity AND epidemic" and "obesity AND crisis" against which the coverage of *Super Size Me* could be compared. The time period for each search varied according to the circumstances that surrounded each film. For example, the period of *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s analysis began with the coverage of its release at the Cannes International Film Festival in May 2004 and finished in the week following the US Presidential election of November 2004. Varying the time frames of analysis allowed for more flexibility in terms of tracking the length and trajectory of each film's presence within the Australian press.

Concerns have been raised about the so-called "push-button" content analysis described above (Deacon et al. 2007). Particular concerns relevant to this research include the exclusion of pictures, cartoons and other visual aspects of the news; the context of how these stories appear on the page; the lack of access to older, non-archived items of news and the potential for inconsistent results between search engines (Deacon et al. 2007: 133-136). Indeed, the Fairfax Digital Archive was the only database utilised in this research which provided access to images as well as a scanned image of the original page on which a story appeared. However, this archive was only accessible from 2006 onwards meaning it could not be utilised in two of the case studies.

Notwithstanding the issues mentioned above, the content analysis conducted through these digital archives did provide for a useful and valid sample upon which further analysis could proceed. Steps were taken to ensure the reliability of results, including

the manual removal of false listings (e.g. another Michael Moore making the news or duplicates of the same story) and periodical repetition of searches to account for any inconsistencies in the number of 'hits' (Deacon et al.. 2007: 136). The fact that these results were subjected to further qualitative analyses had a mitigating effect on a number of the issues associated with this form of 'push-button' content analysis.

Qualitative News Analysis

The sample of articles generated by the initial content analysis provides a body of texts upon which other analyses can be performed. These draw from a range of qualitative approaches which can be used to analyse large samples of media content, including elements of framing, agenda-setting, discourse analysis and source analysis approaches. Some key areas of concern are outlined below.

An integral aspect to consider when analysing news content is news values. News values are deep-seated, though variable, ideas of what topics are considered news and what features of those topics are worth writing about. As Stuart Hall has argued, the news does not just happen, it is the product of a series of decisions by [j]ournalists and editors [who] select, from the mass of potential news items, the events which constitute 'news' for any day. In part, this is done by some unstated and unstable criteria of *the significant*" (1981: 148). Over several decades, media researchers have sought to compile lists of such criteria, which can help explain why certain stories appear or not, and why some are given greater prominence than others (see Brighton & Foy 2007; Galtung & Ruge 1965; Harcup 2004; Masterton 1992).

According to Tony Harcup (2004), stories appearing in the news tend to fall into at least one of the following categories: *the power elite* – stories involving powerful individuals, organisations or institutions; *celebrity* – stories involving those who are already famous; *entertainment* – stories concerning show-business and other 'human interest' news; *surprise* – stories that shock or contrast with the expected; *bad news* – stories covering conflict and tragedy; *good news* – stories involving rescues, cures, achievements and other positive news; *magnitude* – stories which affect large numbers of people; *relevance* – stories that resonate with the everyday concerns of the audience; *follow-ups* – stories that are already in the news; and *media agenda* – stories that correspond with the news organisation's own agenda.

Of course, these news values can change in importance, as some have argued with the increasing significance of celebrity and entertainment news (see Marshall 2005). Nevertheless, they do provide considerable guidance for understanding why popular political documentaries appeared in the press. These films, which directly challenged the power elite in novel and surprising ways, using commercial success, celebrity and entertainment, clearly speak to a number of the news values outlined above. An analysis of the coverage will help tease out the more common, or dominant, news values which drove the coverage surrounding these films.

It is worth noting Simon Cottle's observation that news values provide a "*generalizing* approximation only" of the complex factors involved in the selection and presentation of news (2008: 75). Furthermore, simply identifying why something is selected as news tells us little about how it is actually represented within the news. It is therefore necessary to broaden our focus to consider other factors which influence

not only whether something appears as news, but what prominence it receives. Theories and research related to agenda-setting provide a useful extension here.

Agenda-setting research includes a focus on how issues are weighted within the news as well as a concern with how audiences interpret the importance of issues in relation to media coverage (Dearing & Rogers 1996). This latter focus is best summed-up in Bernard Cohen's oft-quoted observation that: "the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think but, it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*" (qtd. in Manning 2001: 212). Thus agenda-setting research can include a focus on media audiences and how they interpret media content. As should be clear from the above paragraphs, this thesis does not involve audience research and thus it only draws on elements of agenda-setting theory which are concerned with media content. This involves a consideration of the structure and composition of news agendas, and the factors that can lead to certain issues moving up or down this agenda, or falling from view completely (see Dearing & Rogers 1996, Manning 2001).

This line of inquiry links the coverage of popular political documentaries to coverage of some of the broader issues in question. For example, to understand the ways in which *An Inconvenient Truth* interacted with the press agenda in Australia, it is worthwhile doing some basic content analyses (see above) of the press' coverage of climate change. In each case study, these content analyses were complemented by insights drawn from previous studies to understand the issues and trends associated with the press' coverage of climate change, obesity, the war in Iraq and other relevant issues. There is clearly a link here between agenda-setting research and news values

discussed previously, however, as Cottle argues, "the model of agenda-setting prompts a more contingent, less universalizing or timeless, approach" which is crucial given the state of media change described earlier (2008: 75).

Ideas and theories of agenda-setting also encourage an analysis of the practices and strategies employed by various actors who seek to access and influence the media's agenda. As mentioned previously, studies of news sources are concerned with who gets into the news and why, focusing both on the actual content of the news, and the behind-the-scenes relationships between journalists and their sources. The focus here is on what voices appear within the coverage of these films, noting the different interests at play when film-makers, distributors, politicians, corporate spokespeople or ordinary members of the public comment on these films. Consideration will also be given to the political messages of the films, however broadly they might be defined, and the extent to which the arguments or perspectives offered within the films themselves are incorporated into the coverage. As was the case with the agenda-setting focus, there is a need to consider the findings here within the broader context of news research. In particular, studies documenting the successes, strategies, failures and frustrations of previous dissenting actors on the issues in question will help contextualise these findings.

The questions driving research into news sources about who gets into the news and why inevitably leads to questions about how these voices and positions are represented once they actually secure access to the media agenda. One particularly useful method for analysing representations across substantial numbers of media texts (particularly print-based ones) is offered by theories and research concerned with

frame analysis, or framing. Frames can be defined as "*persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual*" (Gitlin 1981: 7; emphasis in original). While many different definitions exist (see Entman 1993; Reese 2003), this one adequately conveys the idea that frames represent organising principles that journalists draw upon to interpret and then produce accounts of social reality, which are then circulated among the public.

Framing goes further than news values or agenda-setting to explore what aspects of a particular news story are given prominence, and how these selections correspond with the broader culture in which the story is reported. As Entman (1993) argues, frames designate "salience", using a variety of textual devices to communicate what is most important or significant about a particular event or issue. The study of framing is concerned with how particular frames are applied to particular stories. For example, Entman has described how, for a long time, a 'Cold War frame' dominated American coverage of foreign affairs which:

> highlighted certain foreign events – say, civil wars – as problems, identified their source (communist rebels), offered moral judgments (atheistic aggression), and commended particular solutions (US support for the other side). (Entman 1993: 52)

In this study, a focus will be on what frames are applied to the coverage of these films and the political issues they engage with. There are two levels of analysis here: one which looks at how the films themselves are framed in relation to the issue (e.g. as documentaries or as propaganda) and assesses the nature of their contribution to public knowledge; and the other which looks more broadly at the coverage presented to see how news coverage of the issue relates to the arguments presented in the films

(e.g. understanding that the adoption of climate change policies equals a threat to economic growth).

Since frames are about persistent patterns of interpretation, emphasis and exclusion, there is a need to closely analyse the news stories in which these films appear to see how these frames are constructed. Accordingly there is a need to pay attention to the use of language, including metaphors, comparisons and the repetition of certain phrases both within and across texts and the order in which information is presented (Entman 1993: 52). This analysis needs to be complemented with an awareness of how these frames connect with the broader culture. As Snow and Benford have argued, some frames "resonate with cultural narrations, that is, with the stories, myths and folk tales that are part and parcel of one's cultural heritage" (qtd in Gamson & Modigliani 1989: 5).

It is on this topic of 'cultural narrations' that we return to questions of discourse. Studies of media discourse are varied (see Bell & Garrett 1998) with a heavy debt to the study of linguistics, semiotics and literary analysis (Van Dijk 1988). Indeed, there is much in the method outlined thus far which borrows from the discourse analysis tradition. Of particular inspiration have been studies by Cottle (2004) and Carvalho (2005) which have analysed large samples of newspaper content incorporating, to varying degrees, elements of a discourse analytical approach. One particular aspect of this research worth highlighting here is the notion of 'critical discourse moments', defined by Carvalho (drawing on Chilton 1987 and Gamson 1992) as moments "marked by particular events that potentially challenge existing discursive positions and constructs or, in contrast, may contribute to their further sedimentation" (2005: 6).

In her analysis, she describes a particular speech by Margaret Thatcher in 1989 as a critical discourse moment within political debates on climate change which shifted the focus of debate from a national to an international level, "thereby re-locat[ing] responsibilities from specific agents in specific places to a generalized, globalized *physical* problem" (2005: 7). This notion of critical discourse moments provides a useful way of thinking about the potential ways in which popular political documentaries impact upon political debate. This, of course, remains something to be investigated in the research that follows.

It is worth re-stating here that there are some important limitations in the method outlined above which focuses much of its analysis on media content alone. William Gamson, for example, has noted how applications of frame analysis often assume a "relatively passive audience" whereby the identification of frames within a text is deemed evidence enough of how a particular issue is understood by the audience (2003: x-xi). As noted earlier, any analyses of media content needs to be tempered with an awareness of the various interpretive practices that audiences bring to the consumption of texts. Bearing that in mind, it is nevertheless worth outlining some of the key concerns of this analysis which should lend more clarity to this discussion.

This study's analysis of the news coverage of popular political documentaries will focus on:

- the language used to describe the films; particular phrases which occur across different stories, including the way headlines and intro sentences create certain expectations for the stories that follow

- the range and frequency of voices that appear in the articles and the social position attached to them

- other sources of evidence used (e.g. attribution of facts or opinion to people or institutions)

- the particular type of article (i.e. review, 'hard-news', business, editorial, letters to the editor etc)

- the position in which stories appear in the newspaper (page number and section)

- the 'hook' or 'angle' of the story

- the origin of the story (whether it is syndicated from another outlet, where the story is filed from)

Given the large number of articles sampled (1197 in total) the following case studies will include numerous examples of the press coverage surrounding these films. In presenting these examples, further details of the type of analysis undertaken will be provided. Finally, it should be noted that this analysis encompasses all sections of the newspaper, including supplements and letters to the editor. Therefore, in following case studies, the analysis will occasionally consider how coverage fluctuated between

various sections of the newspaper – between the news pages and the op-ed sections for example.

REGARDING DISCOURSE

Discourse has already been mentioned a number of times in this thesis, however some further clarification of its use within this research is needed. Bell and Garrett (1998: 2) have noted the "conspicuous lack of agreement" on what discourse means in relation to media studies. It remains a contested term. As discussed previously, discourse is used in this thesis to refer to the broader networks of meaning which we draw upon to make sense of the world. This view of discourse differs from the more linguistically oriented approaches – sometimes referred to as the *formalist* or *structuralist* approach – which focuses on the formal elements of language (Richardson 2007: 22).

A key figure here is Michel Foucault who viewed discourse as a pervasive and fundamental element of human existence. For Foucault (1972), discourses pervade all elements of society, from various forms of cultural expression through to an individual's sense of self. It is through a discourse that we can "inhabit" a range of subjectivities related to age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and so on (Hartley 2002: 74). Such an understanding of discourse has provoked immense theoretical debate within the study of media and culture more broadly (see Fairclough 1992; Billig 1997; Carey 1997).

Fairclough (1992), for example, incorporates much of Foucault's insights into his own understanding of discourse but argues that he overstates the constitutive power of

discourse at the expense of individual agency and an acknowledgment of a material world outside of discourse. Instead, he argues for a dialectical view of discourse which recognises that discursive practices (e.g. communication) "are constrained by the fact that they inevitably take place within a constituted, material reality, with preconstituted 'objects' and preconstituted social subjects" (1992: 60). This emphasis on a material or external reality outside of discourse runs against the Foucauldian idea that social reality, in its totality, is constituted through discourse. From an analytical perspective, this means attending to both texts and discourses, but also the social factors which might influence their development.

There is much more that could be written about this topic, but heeding the call made by Couldry (2000: 14) and Hall (1992: 280) about the pitfalls of over-theorisation, this thesis will not pursue the full breadth or nuance of these theories. Instead, they are developed for the purpose of opening up a perspective on the research that follows. In summary then, this thesis agrees with the position of Fairclough given above that there is a 'dialectical' relationship between discourse on the one hand, and the material world outside of the text. Further inspiration here is drawn from Paul Manning who insists that, while discourse theory is surely right to argue that news and other media are socially constructed (i.e. through discourse),

> it is quite another thing to suggest that we should abandon the task of placing news text production in a wider social context. While all measures of social reality are, in one sense, inscribed by discourse, if we do not attempt to relate news media accounts to alternative visions or assessments, we are abandoning the hope that the news media can in any way be held to account – by academic researchers or anybody else. (2001: 47)

The notion of discourse then, is employed in this thesis as a way of affirming that discourses are powerful: they influence how we think about a particular topic or issue which, in turn, influences how we choose to act on the basis of such thinking (Rose

2001: 142). However, in considering how texts might contribute to, or challenge, these prevailing discourses, there is a need to always be mindful of the wider social context in which they are produced and consumed.

Finally, as was noted earlier, discourses do not circulate on an equal footing; some carry more weight and more legitimacy than others. Fairclough (2000), for example, has analysed the language deployed by the British New Labour government to argue that a dominant discourse of neo-liberalism pervades both their policy and their rhetoric, effectively marginalising other conceptions of economic governance. The power of discourse then, resides not only in its influence on the way things are understood, but also, in the ways in which alternative understandings are marginalised or obscured from view. A key question when analysing discourse thus revolves around whose interests are supported by the prevailing hierarchy.

AN AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

The selection of Australia as a research site reflects my own personal background and the context I know best. However, as noted already, there is also a need to bring different research contexts to bear on the study of popular political documentaries. An Australian context connects this research to broader studies concerned with globalising or trans-national trends within the media. The following discussion will advance some brief but important points regarding this Australian context.

Contemporary cinema is uniquely suited to crossing borders and crossing cultures. As Tom O'Regan (2004) argues (citing McQuail) "what distinguishes the cinema from a

good proportion of broadcasting and book publishing is that it is from its inception *international*" (262 emphasis added). O'Regan argues that cinema is permeated with a logic of "cultural exchange" that influences the production, distribution, reception and study of film across the globe. The translation, adaptation and reception of films across national and cultural boundaries are themselves representative of broader cultural trends. As Michael Schudson argues:

> The intertwinings of local, regional, national, and global cultures are now complex beyond reckoning. Cultures flow in, out, around, and through state borders; within states, centres radiate to peripheries but peripheries influence centres too; in the world system the same phenomenon is repeated and culture flows in many directions. (Schudson qtd. in O'Regan 2004: 272)

The dynamics of this cinematic cultural exchange will differ from culture to culture. Commenting on the capacity of the media to cut across spatial boundaries in addressing a global audience, Ien Ang reminds us that "global media do affect, but cannot control local meanings" (1996: 151). The analysis of the films' reception in the Australian press will thus proceed with an awareness that the findings produced will be stamped with a distinctiveness derived from a unique historical and cultural location.

As a general overview, Australia belongs to the developed world. It is described by Ien Ang as being a part of the "semi-periphery" – "like the Netherlands or Sweden..., a part of 'the West' but relatively marginal within it" (1996: 161). Established as a British colony, it retains strong political, economic and cultural links to the United Kingdom. However, it is arguably with the United States that Australia now shares its closest cultural relationship. A large scale enquiry into the everyday culture of Australian citizens at the turn of the twenty-first century found that:

> younger Australians display a preference for programs, musicians and authors emanating from the United States to a far greater extent than Australians in middle age who, in turn, are more disposed towards American cultural materials than older Australians. (Bennett, Frow & Emmison 1999: 202)

Of course this discussion cannot come close to offering even a general overview of Australian culture. The point being made for now is that Australia shares a strong cultural connection to the United States that must be acknowledged when considering the reception of these political documentaries within the Australian press. Furthermore, this feature of Australian culture links it with more widespread debates about the global influence of American culture.

The newspaper was once the most esteemed form of news media in Australia. However, recent research shows that newspapers now trail television as Australia's preferred source of news (Conley & Lamble 2006; Tiffen 2006). The rise of the internet has drawn further attention away from the newspaper and, according to Rod Tiffen, the circulation of newspapers in Australia has been in a state of "absolute decline" for a considerable period (Tiffen 2006: 98). Nevertheless, as Conley and Lamble argue, "the print media continue to play a significant role in public debate and policy" in Australia (2006: 30, see also Craig 2004: 90-1) and recent research has found that so-called Middle Australians (the middle classes) still regard the newspaper as their most influential source of news (Pusey 2003).

The newspapers chosen for analysis include the only national newspaper, *The Australian* (a broadsheet), and two Melbourne-based newspapers, the *Herald Sun* (a tabloid) and the *Age* (a broadsheet). As will be argued below, these newspapers can be viewed together as broadly representing the Australian newspaper environment.

Australia has some of the highest levels of concentrated media ownership in the developed world (see Tiffen 2006; Tiffen & Gittins 2004). Newspapers belonging to the Rupert Murdoch-owned News Corporation account for nearly two thirds of the daily metropolitan newspaper circulation in Australia (Tiffen 2006: 38). Two of the newspapers analysed, the *Herald Sun* and *The Australian* belong to the News Corporation stable. The *Age* is part of the Fairfax Group which also owns the major Sydney-based broadsheet, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, among others.

Newspapers belonging to News Corporation are frequently criticised for aligning themselves too closely with the opinions of their owner, Rupert Murdoch (see Conley & Lamble 2006; Suich 2004; Tiffen 2006). In general, newspapers belonging to Murdoch are perceived to have a socially conservative, free-market bias, while Fairfax newspapers are deemed to hold a leftist-liberal perspective (Suich 2004). Nevertheless, according to Rodney Tiffen, it is unlikely that newspapers operating in such a highly concentrated environment would risk losing readership by adopting a blatantly partisan perspective (2006: 38). This means that the differences between Australian newspapers belonging to different publishers are perhaps subtler than those found in other areas such as the United Kingdom (see Franklin 2008), or the United States.

The research sample includes both broadsheet and tabloid newspapers. It has often been argued that tabloids are associated with more trivial and sensationalised stories while broadsheets tend to focus more on 'hard' news and in-depth analysis (Allan 2004: 223). However, Australia, like many other countries, has witnessed increasing debate about whether such distinctions remain valid, as news values typically

associated with the tabloids appear to be becoming the norm across the media spectrum (see Allan 2004; Conley & Lamble 2006; Cunningham & Turner 2006; Turner 1999). Annual reports by the Australian Press Council have noted a number of trends which are changing the way newspapers operate in Australia. They note "the blurring of fact and opinion," the transformation of newspaper companies into "multi-media companies" with a strong online presence and "major changes in the expectations of journalists" who compile content for multiple mediums while also being encouraged to add commentary to their reportage (APC 2006).

While perspectives on the quality of Australian newspapers are varied, it is beyond doubt that the highest selling (and thus widest read) newspapers in Australia are tabloids. The *Herald Sun* boasts the largest readership in Australia claiming over 1.5 million readers per day (*About Us* 2008). The other newspapers in this sample – the *Age* and the *Australian* – claim readerships of 767 000 and 485 000 respectively (per day). A key difference between the newspapers, which is linked to their status as either broadsheet or tabloid, is the audience they target for advertisers. The *Age* and the *Australian* both pride themselves on reaching an "influential", "affluent" and "independent thinking" market (NewsSpace 2008; Fairfax Media 2008). The *Herald Sun*, meanwhile, focuses on reaching as broad an audience as possible through a "strong emotional connection... [its] readers have with the paper" (NewsSpace 2008).

The newspapers used for this research were chosen according to the principle of the "reasonably representative" sample of material. This principle, outlined by Hansen et al. argues that a reasonably representative sample is one

> which is not skewed or biased by the personal preferences or hunches of the researcher, by the desire to 'prove' a particular preconceived point, or by insufficient knowledge of the media and their social context. (1998: 103)

As outlined above, the newspapers chosen for analysis cut across a range of fault-lines within the contemporary Australian press – from different types of newspaper (tabloid/broadsheet) and their different readerships through to different owners (Fairfax/News Corporation).

CONCLUSION

The news media can be regarded as a type of interpretive audience, which in making its interpretations known to a general readership, can provide an invaluable resource for examining how popular political documentaries contribute to public knowledge. This chapter has outlined an empirically oriented method of pursuing this aim that draws selectively from a range of different research traditions: aspects of the political economy tradition inform this method's focus on context; the approach to analysing the films has links with a more cultural studies orientation; while the study of the interaction between the films and the press owes much to media sociology. This is by no means a common approach to the study of the documentary, but when confronted with unprecedented media phenomena – as these films are – there is much to be gained from seeking new methods and new perspectives. The following three chapters will illustrate that point.

CHAPTER 4

FAHRENHEIT 9/11:

ACCESS, AUTHORITY AND PROPAGANDA

You know I've always thought that it's very ironic that I'm able to do all this and yet what am I on? I'm on networks. I'm distributed by studios that are owned by large corporate entities. Now, why would they want to put me out there when I am opposed to everything that they stand for? And I spend my time on their dime opposing what they believe in. Okay? Well it's because they don't believe in anything. They put me on there because they know that there's millions of people that want to see my film or watch the TV show and so they're going to make money. And I've been able to get my stuff out there because I'm driving my truck through this incredible flaw in capitalism – the greed flaw. The thing that says the rich man will sell you the rope to hang himself with if he thinks he can make a buck off it, well, I'm the rope, I hope. I'm part of the rope. And they also believe that when people watch my stuff, or maybe watch this film or whatever, they think that... you know what, they'll watch this film and they won't do anything because we've done such a good job of numbing their minds and dumbing them down... People aren't going to leave the couch and go and do something political. They're convinced of that. I'm convinced of the opposite. I'm convinced that a few people are going to leave this movie theatre or get up off the couch and go and do something, anything, to get this world back in our hands.

Michael Moore in *The Corporation* (2003).

Any assessment of popular political documentaries needs to acknowledge the enormous influence of Michael Moore. More than any other documentarian, Moore has shown how politics, popularity and the documentary can be blended together to produce eye-catching results. From his first feature film *Roger & Me* (1989), through to his successful television series *The Awful Truth* (1999-2000) and subsequent films, Moore has carved a prominent and controversial niche within popular culture. His

influence is such that it is difficult to conceive of the category "popular political documentary" without his input; four of the top ten grossing documentaries of all time are his. It makes sense then, to focus on Moore's most commercially successful, and arguably most controversial film, *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), as the first of three case studies which look at the way popular political documentaries contribute to public knowledge.

Fahrenheit 9/11 was first released in May 2004 at the Cannes International Film Festival where it won the Palme d'Or for Best Film. Released just months before the much-anticipated US presidential election, the film instantly attracted controversy and dispute over whether its merciless attack on the Bush presidency might influence American voters. In Australia, the film became the highest grossing documentary ever (close to $AU8.5 million)[13], mirroring its success in the US, Europe, the United Kingdom and parts of Asia (Gant 2007: 38; Screen Australia 2010; Toplin 2006: 3). As one Australian columnist wrote following the film's release, Moore had become "the nation's highest-rating political commentator, with 650 000 bums on seats so far, and with a product that doesn't mention Australia" (Megalogenis, *Australian*, 18.08.2004, p.14). In short, *Fahrenheit 9/11* was big news in Australia, and to understand how the film contributed to public knowledge, the nature of this news is worth examining.

Firstly though, this chapter begins with a synopsis of the film itself, followed by a discussion of Michael Moore's celebrity status. This status has developed over the two decades or so that Moore has been in the media spotlight. Given the significant

[13] Later eclipsed by *Michael Jackson's This is It* (2009).

role that celebrity plays within contemporary culture, this topic provides an integral gateway into questions about how *Fahrenheit 9/11* functions as a popular political text. While it has become common for celebrities to become involved in politics through various forms of activism and endorsement, Moore is unusual in the sense that his celebrity is defined by his politics. He has *always* been political, in ways that many other contemporary celebrities or entertainers are not. This has important ramifications for the ways in which he is represented in the media.

Following this discussion, attention will turn to some of the key elements of the film that highlight its connections with popular culture and politics. The textual features of *Fahrenheit 9/11* will be analysed here, including the presence of 'villains' and 'conspiracies' within the film's narrative, as well as the film's use of humour. Before looking more closely at how the Australian press responded to the film, it will also be necessary to look at those elements of the film and the context of its release which enabled it to address audiences outside of the United States.

The interaction between *Fahrenheit 9/11* and the Australian press offers a demonstration of the film's magnetic influence. As will be argued later in this chapter, the press covered the film extensively, while also allowing Moore and the distributors of the film to speak authoritatively about it. In this way, there are interesting connections to be drawn between this coverage and theories surrounding the structure of news, and the ways in which certain "primary definers" (Hall et al. 1978) are able to describe and frame reality. Within much of the coverage, the film was presented as both popular and potent, with the capacity to influence politics in both America and Australia.

At the same time, however, this representation of the film was challenged by those who lamented the film's popularity and prominence. There was much dispute over whether the film constituted propaganda, and thus whether or not it stood as a legitimate form of political communication. This debate ensured that troubling questions about accuracy and validity would shadow the film's portrayal within the coverage.

Ultimately, this interplay between the film and the press coverage represented a site of struggle and opportunity, whereby aspects of the film's argument became magnified while others were obscured or challenged. What emerges in the following analysis is a tale that includes attraction and fascination as well as dispute and contest. It illustrates the ways in which different media forms and different ways of discussing politics can simultaneously clash with and complement each other. In this, the first of three case studies, we gain a glimpse of how popular political documentaries glide along the currents of celebrity, controversy and commercial success to arrive at a prominent though contested place within the news media.

SYNOPSIS

Fahrenheit 9/11 was the fifth film directed by Moore and was the follow-up to his Academy-Award winning *Bowling for Columbine* (2002). It was produced by Moore's own company, Dog Eat Dog Films, with the backing of The Fellowship

Adventure Group, which was really just a front for Miramax Films (Epstein 2005). It was distributed in Australia by Hopscotch Entertainment.[14]

The film begins with an overview of the controversial US election of 2000, where George W. Bush narrowly pipped Al Gore amid heated controversy about the legitimacy of the count. It then offers a highly critical summary of Bush's presidency in the months leading up to the September 11 attacks. Following a brief overview of the event and its aftermath, where again Bush's leadership was criticised, the film then focuses on the business connections between the Bush administration and Saudi Arabian businessmen, in particular, the bin Laden family. This sequence segues into a critical discussion of the US invasion of Afghanistan which was alternately described as inadequate for the task at hand (i.e. catching bin Laden and defeating Al Qaeda) and compromised by business interests. The focus then shifts to look at how the so-called War on Terror affected Americans domestically, looking at the culture of fear and the erosion of civil liberties emblematised by the Patriot Act. The latter half of the film concentrates on the Iraq War, focusing in particular on the war's impact on Iraq, the conduct of American troops, the American media's coverage of the war, and the effects of the war on America's poor and working class.

[14] Production information for each film was drawn from a variety of sources including the credits of the films themselves, the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) and media reports surrounding the films.

THE POPULAR AND THE POLITICAL IN *FAHRENHEIT 9/11*

The Celebrity of Michael Moore

Michael Moore had become a popular symbol of dissent well before the night of 23 March 2003. His breakthrough movie *Roger & Me* (1989) about the effects of economic downsizing in small-town America, established Moore's connection with the working class and his form of ironic social commentary led enthusiastic reviewers to compare him to the likes of Voltaire, Jonathan Swift and Mark Twain (Bernstein 1990, Levy 2008). Moore's later film, *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), was a huge hit both with critics and the box office, and it was for this movie that Moore found himself on stage at the Kodak Theatre in Los Angeles on 23 March 2003. He was there to accept the Academy Award for Best Documentary and in the half-minute or so that followed, Moore staked his claim as one of popular culture's most recognisable critics of the Bush administration. Gesturing towards his fellow nominees, Moore said:

> They're here in solidarity with me because we like nonfiction. We like nonfiction and we live in fictitious times. We live in the time where we have fictitious election results that elect a fictitious president. We live in a time where we have a man sending us to war for fictitious reasons. Whether it's the fiction of duct tape or the fiction of orange alerts, we are against this war, Mr Bush. Shame on you, Mr Bush, shame on you. And anytime you've got the Pope and the Dixie Chicks up against you, your time is up. (qtd in Rapoport 2007: 6)

The reception to his speech was mixed; some booed, some clapped. According to one analysis, Moore had misread the popular mood which, it was argued, was strongly in favour of war at that time (Rapoport 2007: 7). Nevertheless, in less than a week after the first US bombs were dropped on Iraq and over a year before the release of

Fahrenheit 9/11, Moore had positioned himself as a leading figure in public opposition to the war.

Moore's performance on that particular Oscars night fitted perfectly with his unique celebrity status. Celebrities are a prominent feature of contemporary Western culture and they have also, not surprisingly, become a prominent subject of contemporary media research. Graeme Turner's *Understanding Celebrity* (2004) charts the academic evolution of celebrity studies which he uses to develop the following definition of celebrity.

> Celebrity... is *a genre of representation and a discursive effect; it is a commodity traded by the promotions, publicity and media industries that produce these representations and effects; and it is a cultural formation that has a social function we can better understand.* (2004: 9; emphasis in original)

Here we find both a multi-faceted definition and a challenge for researchers to further understand how the phenomenon of celebrity is integrated into our social world. By referring to celebrity as "a genre of representation and a discursive effect," Turner recognises the intensely mediated character of celebrity, which depends upon the construction and maintenance of a particular image infused with particular meanings. The "Michael Moore" known to audiences worldwide is, of course, a construct, a symbolic deviation from the flesh-and-blood Michael Moore. In calling attention to the celebrity's commodity status and its link with production and promotion, Turner also reminds us that celebrities do not emerge organically from ordinary social interaction. Rather, they are, in part, industrial products ("commodities"), cultivated to attract financial dividends within a given cultural marketplace. However, this definition highlights how this commodity value remains wedded to a particular cultural value expressed through the various levels of engagement that people have with celebrities. The features of celebrity described by Turner are thus complex and

inter-connected. Accordingly, Turner argues, "it is the detail that matters as we develop an understanding of the roles played by celebrity within popular culture" (Turner 2004: 7). As Boykoff and Goodman (2009) have argued, celebrity is a heterogeneous category and our understanding of its cultural power needs to attend to the diverse contexts in which celebrities are produced, represented and interpreted. The following discussion will therefore flesh out the character of Moore's celebrity which is essential for understanding the production and reception of *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

Moore is a celebrity defined by his politics. This makes him unique. As the blurb on the Jesse Larner's book *Moore & Us: The Rise of Michael Moore and His Quest for a New World Order* (2005) states rather dramatically: "He's not running for any office, doesn't want to run for or hold any office, reports to no editor, no director, no foundation, and thus has no accountability... Moore's only job is politics – one-man politics." Of course, it is not his politics which gives him his profile; rather it is capacity to present them in an entertaining and commercially successful way. Nevertheless, he is different to other entertainment-based celebrities. His image does not include the fall-back position of 'rock star' or 'actor' – in contrast to, say, Bono, Angelina Jolie or other celebrity activists. His image has always been political. In this way, some of the more useful insights into Moore's celebrity can be taken from studies concerned with how political culture has been infused with celebrity culture – a trend which has arguably intensified in recent decades (see Corner & Pels 2003; McNair 2001; Street 2001). As John Corner notes, "the celebrity frame" is becoming an increasingly relevant tool for analysing the way political actors operate in contemporary politics (2003: 72). Though he stands outside the world of official

politics, Moore's politicised image encourages us to draw upon studies of political communication in our analysis of his celebrity.

According to John Corner, political communication today is characterised by performances of "political personhood" (2003). These performances – almost always mediated – can be seen in three broad modes: iconic, vocal and kinetic (Corner 2003: 69). The iconic mode follows the conventions of "painting and then photography in displaying the demeanour, posture and associative contexts of the political self" (Corner 2003: 69). In relation to Moore, one of the more striking aspects of his Oscars speech cited above was the sight of him in a relatively smart looking suit and bow-tie. It represented something of an iconic 'break' for Moore who is usually seen wearing jeans, a baseball cap and a loose-fitting shirt or jacket. Such an outfit has been consistent across a range of public appearances, films, television shows and book covers. The image adorning the front of his best-selling book *Stupid White Men*[15] offers a cogent summary of Moore's public visage in which he looms as a smug King Kong-like figure, brandishing a miniature Washington Monument before a table of white men in business suits.

Moore's public image – the iconic aspect of his performance – has been frequently commented upon (see Rizzo 2005; Schultz 2005). James McEnteer describes Moore as "a shambling, slovenly – if bright and relentless – Everyman, out to confront the heartless Corporate Beast" (2006: 81). The image is that of the working-class hero, the friend of the little guy, and it is a performance that matches other aspects of his public persona. At the same time however, the success he's enjoyed over his career

[15] Viewed at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stupid_White_Men_...and_Other_Sorry_Excuses_for_the_State_of_the_Nation!

has strained the credibility with which he has been able to maintain his working class persona. Reports of the multi-million dollar profits his films have generated, his hefty public speaking fees and his impressive real estate portfolio have grated with Moore's public image while also providing plenty of fodder for his critics (Rapoport 2007). Given his strident political views and the prominence he has achieved, Moore has become a divisive figure, and the target of numerous public attacks (see Hardy & Clarke 2004).

Moore's iconic performances are complemented by vocal and kinetic modes of projecting his political self. As a writer he employs a relaxed and conversational tone. As a narrator of his films he frequently uses humour and pop-cultural references, while engaging audiences with reflections and anecdotes from his personal life. Such strategies are designed to close the distance between Moore and his viewers, inviting them to see him as just as 'ordinary guy.' His upbringing in the blue-collar town of Flint, Michigan, is a recurring touchstone throughout his films, a verifier of his working-class credentials.

Moore's kinetic performances – the way he acts and behaves when he is in the public eye – can be assessed on two levels: on a macro-level, his production or direction of documentaries and television shows can be seen as a kinetic performance in total, with the viewers aware that Moore is the man behind the show, putting it all together. However, his 'on-screen' performances also represent a kinetic performance at a micro-level in which Moore is literally the star of the show.

In performing this role, Moore frequently employs stunts or gimmicks designed to both entertain and serve his political arguments at the same time. When he sought to take on the tobacco industry for example, Moore orchestrated a stunt whereby tracheotomy patients gathered outside the Phillip Morris headquarters to sing Christmas carols (cited in Toplin 2006: 41-2). In *Bowling for Columbine*, he wanders into Canadian houses seemingly uninvited and unannounced to illustrate the contrast between what he sees as their culture of acceptance and safety compared to America's fear and violence. His speech at the Oscars provides another example of his rebellious and mischievous streak.

This kinetic element brings the ambiguities of Moore's public performance into sharp focus. While his stunts are usually geared towards supporting a political argument, their primary aim often seems to be entertainment. Indeed, Moore has claimed in the past that his primary goal as a film-maker is to make movies that people want to watch: "I actually put the entertainment and the art before the politics" (qtd in Toplin 2006: 11-12). There are many ways of interpreting this statement: it could be an accurate reflection of Moore's aims as a filmmaker; or it could be a calculated defensive strategy which allows him – much like the court jester of old – to push certain boundaries and make certain claims under the less threatening guise of 'entertainment.' Whatever the case it highlights a point at which Moore performs potentially contradictory public roles. It raises questions over the expectations people bring to watching his films and how they interpret the arguments he offers. He occupies, it seems, something of a 'no-man's land' whereby his politics is defined, magnified but then undermined by his particular celebrity status. Although he has at times worked closely with The Democratic Party and Ralph Nader, his celebrity

remains closely tied to his 'outsider' status. Thus, while he possesses legitimacy and credibility as an entertainer and as a film-maker, his status as a political spokesperson is ever-contested.

This description of Moore's celebrity also needs to acknowledge his commodity value as a bankable star with proven box office appeal. He stands virtually alone among documentary film-makers as having this quality. And this in turn leads to a unique set of expectations in the production and financing of his films. Moore recounted in an interview following *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s release how Harvey Weinstein, an executive producer of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, bemoaned his lack of on-screen presence:

> Harvey [Weinstein] was very disappointed that he didn't see my mug every three minutes in the film. And I tried to explain to him that a little bit of me goes a long way. (qtd in Rizzo 2005: 33)

While Moore may have indeed been less visible, this anecdote nevertheless reminds us of the commercial environment in which Moore operates. Weinstein's concern as a key stakeholder is clear: will audiences still like the movie (and therefore pay to see it) if Moore is not prominent within it? Of course, Moore's commodity value can also be seen as a type of guarantor, quelling fears about the commercial value of his projects.

Fahrenheit 9/11 was originally set to be distributed by the Walt Disney Company through its subsidiary Miramax; however, reports began surfacing in May 2004 indicating that Disney would not allow Miramax to distribute the film (Rutenberg 2004). The heat was generated not so much by Disney's refusal – they had pulled away from other controversial projects in the past – but rather by the alleged timing of the decision. Moore claimed that Disney only blocked *Fahrenheit 9/11* after the film

had been made and they realised that it might endanger tax breaks for Disney's theme parks in Florida, which was governed at the time by George W. Bush's brother, Jeb Bush (Moore 2004). However, according to Disney and other reports, the decision to veto the movie had been made in 2003 (Epstein 2005). This controversy took place against the backdrop of reports that Miramax founders, Bob and Harvey Weinstein, were looking to sever ties with Disney (Schultz 2005: 197).

The rights to distribute *Fahrenheit 9/11* were eventually purchased by the Fellowship Adventure Group, a so-called 'corporate front' owned by the Weinstein brothers which allowed them to outsource the theatrical and DVD distribution of the movie (Epstein 2005). According to an analysis of *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s production and distribution conducted by Edward Epstein of *Slate Magazine*, Disney, the Weinstein brothers and Moore all made substantial multi-million dollar profits from the film (Epstein 2005). Without wanting to get mired in the specifics, it seems plausible that the controversy surrounding the film's distribution worked in the film's favour. According to Toplin, "Moore may have promoted the notion of in-house censorship on Disney's part to gain valuable publicity when his movie hit the theatres" (2006: 15). This intriguing saga provokes worrying concerns about censorship while at the same time confirming the market value of celebrity that can occasionally trump political opposition. As Moore has argued "the reason I survive doing what I do with these large media conglomerates whose heads aren't necessarily in agreement with me politically is I make them a lot of money" (qtd in Bachrach 2005).

To understand how popular political documentaries contribute to public knowledge, the concept of celebrity provides an integral analytical frame. As seen with the

example of Moore, it is a multi-faceted concept that asks us to attend to the constructed and performative nature of celebrity which can then translate into considerable commodity value. In the case of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, it ensured the film would receive backing while also increasing the likelihood that other media would sit up and take notice as Moore took critical aim at the Bush administration.

Moore's engagement with politics, and his visibility as a political commentator, reflects a broader dynamic in which political culture and celebrity culture have become increasingly intertwined. Such an environment lends itself to particularly personal and performative modes of political communication seen in many guises including the popular political documentary. Across the three case studies presented here, we can find an array of political messages conveyed through a charismatic individual spokesman, whose own personal story provides a backdrop to the issues in question. Crucially, this takes place within a media environment, which, according to Blumler and Gurevitch, has more 'tolerance' for both a broader range of political standpoints, and a broader range of political communicators (2005: 107-9).

Having looked at Moore's position as a celebrity defined by his politics, it is now necessary to pay attention to the *Fahrenheit 9/11* text. The following section will look at how the film immerses political critique within various tropes and trends of popular culture, while also exploring how it addresses audiences beyond American shores. This discussion will offer analysis of key points in the film while also flagging key points of interest which would emerge within the Australian press coverage of the film.

Villains and Conspiracies

Fahrenheit 9/11 begins with a plaintive lament from Moore: "was it all just a dream?" The narration frames footage of Al Gore celebrating while news reports from that fateful 2000 election 'confirm' that Gore has won the key state of Florida. In a film which devotes just over two hours to condemning the Bush administration, this opening sequence points to a possibly bright future that was cruelly thwarted. Moore narrates the piece forlornly:

> Was it a dream? Or was it real? It was election night 2000, and everything seemed to be going as planned.

This pre-credit sequence explores how these plans unravelled: from the confusion amongst television networks as to who really won in Florida; to the shady connections between Bush and key figures within the Florida electoral process; to Bush's notably *un*-ceremonious Inauguration Day parade.

The overall narrative is one that most viewers would be familiar with: Bush *stole* the election. American democracy has failed. This opening sequence is integral to establishing a sense of outrage which fuels *Fahrenheit's* criticisms of the Bush administration. It marks the beginning of a compressed and critical history of George W. Bush's first nine months in office leading up to September 11.

In diagnosing the failure of American democracy, *Fahrenheit 9/11* implicitly presents itself as a corrective mechanism. From the outset, *Fahrenheit 9/11* engages viewers with the claim that this is how things *really* are. According to Moore, the audience experience of watching the film:

> ... will be like Toto pulling back the curtain so the people can see what is really going on, and they're going to be shocked, and they're going to be in awe, and they are going to respond accordingly. (qtd in Rizzo 2005: 34)

Such an orientation resonates with the public service tradition of documentary film and it is developed over the course of the movie. It also appeals to the prevailing sense of cynicism in which much of contemporary politics is now cast (see Corner & Pels 2003).

Fahrenheit 9/11 makes a concerted appeal to a cynical public in its allegations of a convoluted but compromising relationship between the Bush Administration, big business and the Saudi Royal family. Bemused that members of the bin Laden family were allowed to leave the United States in the days after September 11, Moore explores why such a scenario might have arisen. There is talk of businesses profiting from 9/11, shady connections between Bush's father and his interests with the global investment firm, the Carlyle Group. This section is more about asking questions than answering them, as shown in the following narrated extract:

> Okay, let's say one group of people, like the American people, pay you $400, 000 a year to be President of the United States, but then another group of people invest in you, your friends, and their related businesses $1.4 billion over a number of years, who you gonna like? Who's your daddy?

While this section of the film is consistent in casting doubt on George W. Bush's fitness for the presidency, it does not offer a cogent explanation as to why the Bush administration acted the way it did during this time. According to Toplin, there were enough subjects covered during the early stages of the film to cover multiple documentaries:

> In the case of each subject under study, Moore could point to the *appearance* of smoke without producing a smoking gun. Indeed, Moore would have had to devote the full two hours of his movie to just one of these sub issues if he intended to give his audience a sense of comprehensive analysis. (Toplin: 2006: 92)

While Toplin essentially forgives this scattergun approach, which points to "the *appearance* of smoke", there were many who would not. As just a minor sample of how this approach was received by some, a review in the *Herald Sun* laments that "Moore conveniently ignores facts..." in his depiction of American interests in the Middle East and observes that "nowhere is to be found the smoking gun Moore promised would blow Bush away" (Forbes, 25.07.04, E09).

Putting those criticisms aside for a moment, there is a strong link between this sequence of the film and a broader current of popular entertainment which addresses a cynical and distrustful public – namely, the conspiracy theory. John Street includes an analysis of "politics as conspiracy" in his discussion on the ways in which politics is portrayed within popular media (2001: 60-1). Conspiracy films, argues Street, "suggest... that behind the appearance of democracy lies a reality in which everything is the result of the corrupt machinations of unaccountable and devious individuals or institutions" (2001: 71). Numerous examples can be cited here, from the novels of John le Carré, to the television series *The X-Files* (1993-2002) or *The Matrix* trilogy of films (1999, 2003, 2003). Indeed, the allegations of corruption and collusion hinted at in the first half of *Fahrenheit 9/11* have been popularly articulated elsewhere. Hollywood films such as *Three Kings* (1999) and *Wag the Dog* (1997) are just two examples of films that raise doubts about the motivations behind American foreign policy while a search of the online bookstore *amazon.com* for books relating to oil, America and the Middle East reveal a vigorous popular-political discourse that has echoes in the first half of *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Thus there is something of a trade-off in Moore's movie in which considerable cultural resonance is purchased via some

widespread and under-supported muckraking on the one hand; and a vulnerability to counter-argument, contradiction and a failure to meet documentary standards on the other. It is one of the many contradictions that emerge from *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s ambiguous mode of public address.

Complementing this tale of shady business connections in the early stages of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, we can also find a concerted attempt to undermine the authority of George W. Bush. On 19 March 2003, Bush gave a live speech from the White House in which he declared war on Iraq:

> My fellow citizens, at this hour, American and coalition forces are in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq, to free its people and to defend the world from grave danger. (*CNN* 2003)

The speech was broadcast across the globe and it also featured in *Fahrenheit 9/11*. The film shows clips from that speech as well as other un-named speeches showing Bush and other members of the administration preparing to address the nation. They are moments in which the President is off-guard – having make-up applied, asking questions, appearing nervous. During the opening credit sequence, against the quiet but ominous plucking of guitar strings, Bush's character is portrayed as a mixture of false sincerity and concealed arrogance. By the time he actually stares down the camera to give his stern declaration of war (shown later in the movie), the viewer has been encouraged to share Moore's scornful vantage point.

The use of out-takes is a time-honoured tradition in documentary film; the noted documentarian Emile de Antonio once quipped that "the real history of the United States in the Cold War is the out-takes" (qtd. in Bruzzi 2000: 139). Moore's use of out-takes is part of a rhetorical strategy designed to endow his depiction of events

with a sense of authenticity while challenging the official narratives offered by the administration. In his analysis of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Louis Menand (2004) argues that documentaries "show you what was not intended for you to see". Out-takes are used frequently in *Fahrenheit 9/11* and when they concern the president they can almost always be read as a challenge to Bush's crafted image of public authority. Perhaps the most damning example was the infamous footage of Bush's initial response to the World Trade Centre attacks. Bush was shown reading a children's book to a Florida elementary school class when, according to Moore's narration, one of his adviser's informed him that America was "under attack." Moore's deadpan commentary, as a clock shows close to seven minutes elapsing while Bush remains seated, is designed to inflict some decisive blows against Bush's leadership:

> As Bush sat in that Florida classroom, was he wondering if maybe he should have shown up to work more often? Should he have held at least one meeting since taking office to discuss the threat of terrorism with his head of counter-terrorism?

Commenting on this scene in a syndicated piece that appeared in *The Age*, Philip Shenon notes that "Bush's slow, hesitant reaction to the disastrous news has never been a secret. But seeing the actual footage, with the minutes ticking by, may prove more damaging to the White House than all the statistics in the world" (26.06.04, FP1). It is a scene that has been proved popular in cyberspace as well, where it is regularly viewed and commented upon on *YouTube*. The book meanwhile, which is actually called *The Pet Goat*, has become a common derogatory reference to the Bush presidency, or for presidential dithering in general. For example, in December 2008, *Reason* magazine published a story on their website under the heading "Obama's 'My Pet Goat' Moment" about his delayed response to reports of a governor's misconduct (Chapman 2008). This example provides a small but telling example of *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s cultural reach, with the controversy surrounding it becoming a shared cultural

marker of the Bush presidency. As will be argued in a later section, *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s targeting of Bush provides a key frame for the Australian press coverage concerning the film. However, there remain some other features of the *Fahrenheit 9/11* text that warrant discussion below.

The Moore Style

Fahrenheit 9/11 includes an array of different stylistic techniques – from out-takes, to hand-held observational sequences, talking head interviews, animation and poached news clips. According to Richard Porton, the film offers some established documentary practices blended with "a host of other nonfiction genres: adversarial campaign commercials as well as the newer, even less intellectually respectable terrain of rock videos and reality television" (2004: 4). One satiric sketch superimposes the heads of Bush, Rumsfeld, Cheney and Blair onto the opening sequence of the long-running television serial *Bonanza*. Pop music is used frequently throughout *Fahrenheit 9/11*: the chorus to The Animals' "We Gotta Get Out of this Place" comically references the claim by Moore that members of the bin Laden family were allowed to leave the United States in the days after September 11 at a time when "not even Ricky Martin could fly." Elsewhere, a riff from the Eric Clapton song "Cocaine" subversively suggests the 'real' reason why Bush was suspended from the military in the early 1970s. Britney Spears, Robert de Niro and Ben Affleck are among a number of celebrities that populate the film's narrative. Later in the film, Moore drives around Capitol Hill in an ice-cream van reading the Patriot Act after it was revealed that members of Congress do not fully read most of the bills they pass.

These examples illustrate how *Fahrenheit 9/11*, like other Moore films, trades on irony, humour and a strong affinity with popular culture.

The stylistic eclecticism of *Fahrenheit 9/11* has provoked some unease about its status as a documentary. As Clinton McClung, a prominent figure within the American documentary film community commented:

> It's hard for me to consider *Fahrenheit 9/11* as a documentary... While I was certainly one of the first to run out and see the film, even beforehand I didn't think of it as a documentary, but more as a cinematic manifesto – one that was tailor-made to speak to a specific audience. (*Cineaste* 2005: 35)

Of course, disputing *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s status as a documentary was a regular charge made by critics of the film, whose concerns with Moore's approach often supplemented a rejection of his politics as well (more on this later). Nevertheless, there is a need to deal with the question of how a film like *Fahrenheit 9/11* fits within the documentary tradition. This issue can be usefully explored via a brief detour to an earlier moment in Moore's career.

Moore's break-through success with *Roger & Me* (1989) was followed by controversy surrounding some inconsistencies in the film's chronology which concerned the closing down of General Motors' auto-factories in Moore's hometown of Flint, Michigan. This issue came to a head in a much-cited interview Moore gave with Harlan Jacobson of *Film Comment*, an American film journal. In the interview, Jacobson repeatedly asked Moore to account for the chronological discrepancies between the order of events depicted the film, and the order in which they actually occurred. An increasingly exasperated Moore responded by alleging: "You're holding me to a different standard than you would another film... as if I were writing some

kind of college essay" (1989: 23). Shortly after this comment, the following exchange occurred:

> HJ: *Do you think that your film functions as a political manifesto?*
> MM: No not really.
>
> HJ: *Do you think of it as a documentary?*
> MM: No, I think of it as a movie, an entertaining movie. (Jacobson 1989: 24)

Moore went on to say that it was entertaining "like any Charlie Chaplin film that dealt with social commentary, the problems of the day, but also [let] a lot of people laugh a little bit, [and did] not numb them, [did] not totally depress them (qtd in Jacobson 1989: 24).

Making people laugh has been a feature of Moore's work since the very beginning of his film and television career. However, it is important to note here the ambivalence of humour as a rhetorical device when used in political communication. As Marjolein 't Hart has observed, humour can often serve as a "true 'weapon of the weak'" deployed against the politically powerful, while at the same time, "it can also divide and exclude" (2007: 1-2). Furthermore, she notes that "in strongly polarised settings, humour is one of the first victims" (2007: 1-2).

The level of acrimony and dispute surrounding the Iraq War would seemingly qualify as a setting characterised by a high degree of polarisation. Yet, as has been observed by a number of commentators, the infusion of political communication and humour has arguably intensified in Western societies in recent times (see Toplin 2006; Street 2001). Nevertheless, it must also be acknowledged that, in the post-9/11 world, much of the global political discourse is cast in ever-darkening tones of fear, threat and

conflict. This situation is reflected in the tonal shifts taken in *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Within a two-hour time-frame, Moore's pranks and ironic commentary co-exist with dead babies and grieving mothers. The gripping testimonies of poor American teenagers who see similarities between their own run-down neighbourhoods and the images of war on the television contrasts with other depictions of small-town America which seem to invite mockery of their fears that tiny towns such as theirs could be the subject of terrorist attacks. An attempt to lampoon the strength of the so-called Coalition of the Willing utilises crude national stereotypes in its depictions of those nations who support the war, while failing to acknowledge America's major ally, Great Britain, as well as Australia.

There is thus a troublesome dynamic at work in *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s deployment of humour. As an entertainer, Moore is expected to be funny. It is what distinguishes his work from so many other documentaries. As noted above, he uses out-takes, satirical sketches and suggestive soundtracks to humorously attack Bush's legitimacy and authority. Of course, in casting Bush as the central villain, the narrative foregoes a more nuanced approach to recent political history: one that might, for example, acknowledge the role of religion and neo-conservatism as contributors to both Bush's domestic appeal and the foreign policy objectives of his administration (see Toplin 2006).

In dealing with such serious subject matter as the war on terror and the war in Iraq, it is clear that not all subjects in *Fahrenheit 9/11* can be treated in a humorous fashion. According to Toplin, the juxtaposition of serious and comic elements is a staple feature of Moore's work (2006: 40). He argues that such a strategy "surprises and

amuses audiences and helps accentuate political messages" (40). Nevertheless, as Porton has observed, "Moore's analogous alternation of righteous outrage with concerted smarminess has nevertheless proved irksome as well as unsettling for many who feel reluctant to jump on the *Fahrenheit* bandwagon" (2004: 4). In a telling reminder of the expectations audiences bring to viewing *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Evan Williams, from The Australian newspaper opened his review of the film with the following:

> Perhaps the first point to be made about *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Michael Moore's incendiary tirade against George W. Bush, is that it's not especially funny. Much of it is sombre and sorrowful, some of it shocking. If cheekiness and knockabout humour are what appeal to you in Moore, stick to his books. (The Australian, 31.07.04, p. B23)

Humour can be found in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, but it doesn't always sit easily with other features of the film. It also reflects an aspect of Moore's public persona which has troubled commentators who question the depth of Moore's political convictions and the solidarity he attempts to cultivate with so-called 'ordinary Americans.'

A regular complaint against Moore has been that, in feigning sympathy for the working-classes, he instead manipulates them (and us, as viewers) as fodder for both humour and pathos. In an oft-cited review of *Roger & Me*, the noted film critic Pauline Kael, describes the movie as "shallow and facetious, a piece of gonzo demagoguery that made me feel cheap for laughing" (1990: 91). She describes Moore's treatment of his subjects as follows:

> He asks them broad questions about the high rate of unemployment and the soaring crime rate, and their responses make them look like phonies or stupes... What does Moore expect? Why are these people being made targets for the audience's laughter? (1990: 91)

There are some segments of *Fahrenheit 9/11* which could be regarded with the same critical perspective. When an elderly lady in a small-town that has improbably (and

perhaps even laughably) been listed as a possible site for a terrorist attack seems convinced that terrorists want to attack her town, the invitation is there to treat her views with an element of superior disbelief.

The ambiguity in Moore's relationship with ordinary people is deepened by *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s portrayal of American soldiers in Iraq. They are alternately portrayed as brutal killers bred from a culture of violence and computer games, confused and forlorn kids a long way from home and heroic examples of the sacrifices that America's poor continually make in the services of the American rich. All of these representations are, of course, plausible and they provide multiple points of both identification and rejection for *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s audience. They also heighten the sense of contradiction and ambiguity when analysing the film.

Given this contradictory approach, it is perhaps not surprising that there has been much debate about how Moore's films should be classified. A number of theorists have noted how Moore's personalised, polemical style has numerous precedents within the documentary genre – linking his work to the likes of Joris Ivens, Chris Marker, Emile de Antonio, Molly Dineen and Nick Broomfield (see Renov 2005; Porton, 2005; Bruzzi 2000). According to Richard Porton, Moore's personal style is part of a sub-genre which he calls "the documentary-essay tradition" (2004: 4). Michael Renov makes a similar point when he describes Moore as a "personal essayist":

> It is not just Moore's insistent return to Flint and his working-class roots or the ubiquity of Moore himself within the frame that accounts for his films' autobiographical flavour. His cinema is, above all else, a cinema of 'personal voice,' an approach to filmmaking through which the most diverse source material can be linked and stabilized by the writing and voicing of the maker. (2005: 30)

Stella Bruzzi argues that Moore's approach – in which he allocates himself a defining on-screen presence – brings into sharp focus the essential contradictions which lie at the heart of documentary film. Exasperated with what she calls "documentary theory's idealisation of the unbiased film", she asks: "what else is a documentary but a dialogue between a filmmaker, a crew and a situation that, although in existence prior to their arrival, has irrevocably been changed by that arrival?" (Bruzzi 2000: 164) This thesis accepts the argument that *Fahrenheit 9/11* belongs to the documentary tradition. However, the mere fact that Moore's films are so contested and so contestable, is significant for understanding how his film's are interpreted on a broader scale. Though his films may be legitimately labelled documentaries, they also come with a question mark that has hovered over Moore since the initial controversy with *Roger & Me.*

Moore's approach to making documentaries has been one of the key points of dispute within both academic and general discussions of his work. As will be shown in the sections that follow, the ambiguities detailed above were reflected within the Australian press response to the film. Before considering this response in more detail, it is worth exploring how *Fahrenheit 9/11* spoke to audiences non-US audiences.

SPEAKING TRANS-NATIONALLY

Close to half of *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s revenue came from outside America. Of course, given the global dominance of American film, it is not altogether exceptional for an American film to perform well overseas. Nevertheless, these box office figures

provide some indication as to the appeal *Fahrenheit 9/11* had to a more global audience. This discussion will take a step back from the text to consider how the related contexts of the Iraq War and widespread anti-Americanism might have influenced the reception of *Fahrenheit 9/11* internationally.

The Iraq War

The official declaration of war in Iraq by President Bush in March 2003 had been preceded by months of global debate and media scrutiny. The war, led by the USA and its main ally the United Kingdom, received support from a host of smaller nations including Australia. Significantly, the so-called "coalition of the willing" did not include any Arab states. Three of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council – China, Russia and France - opposed the war, as did NATO alliance members, Germany, Canada, Belgium and Norway (Schifferes 2003). This disagreement among the political elite was mirrored by a large and vociferous anti-war movement comprised of various NGOs, social movements and ordinary citizens.

Global opposition to the war reached something of a climax on 15 February 2003 when eight million people across five continents staged coordinated protest marches. Protests of such magnitude had not been seen since the Vietnam War and they serve as telling reminders of the scale of opposition to the war. As one journalist commented at the time, "there may still be two superpowers on the planet: the United States and world public opinion" (Tyler 2003). The existence of widespread popular opposition to the war is crucial for understanding how *Fahrenheit 9/11* contributed to public knowledge. The millions of protestors proved that there would be an audience and a market for a film such as Moore's with a strong anti-war message.

Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that there was also much support *for* the war, particularly among coalition members. Research conducted by the Pew Research Centre for the People and the Press, a US-based research group, found that in 2004 in the US there was still a slim majority in support of the war effort in Iraq and the war on terror.[16] Similar polling in the UK found considerable, though declining support for the war in that year[17] while polling in Australia indicated that at least 40 per cent of the Australian public thought it was worth going to war in May 2004.[18] These polls usually indicated that opposition to the war was highest among Muslim countries and those whose governments opposed the war, such as France and Germany. Without wanting to read too much into the vagaries of public polling, it is nevertheless instructive to bear in mind that, although the figures can be contested, there was a meaningful level of public support for the war. This is a fact that frequently goes unacknowledged in critical accounts of the media at this time or, conversely, is explained as the outcome of government propaganda (see Richardson 2007).

This thesis does not dispute the fact that governments who supported the war mounted considerable public relations efforts both before and during the war to convince the public of the necessity for war. Nor does it dispute that these efforts may have been successful to varying degrees. There is a problem, however, with the idea implicit in some of these arguments that pro-war sentiments among the general public were solely due to propaganda and misinformation. This argument does the public a disservice and overlooks the fact that many people from various walks of life supported the war, and continue to do so, for reasons that have little to do with government deception. While support for the war may have varied, it must be

[16] http://people-press.org/report/210/public-support-for-war-is-steady-but-bush-job-ratings-slip
[17] http://people-press.org/report/?pageid=796
[18] http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/breuropera/74.php?nid=&id=&pnt=74&lb=breu

acknowledged if one is to grasp the way *Fahrenheit 9/11* engaged audiences and other media.

The Media and Iraq

Explanations for *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s success have often argued that the film 'fills a gap' that was created by the failure of the mass media's inability to adequately inform the public and challenge falsehoods about the war in Iraq and the war on terror (see McEnteer 2006: xii – xiii; *Cineaste* 2005). In a war that has perhaps become the most reported conflict in history, it is not surprising that the performance of the media has come under such intense scrutiny (Bromley, 2004: 224). A number of developments support the idea that the news media failed to uphold its public responsibilities in covering the war: from their widespread acceptance of the Weapons of Mass Destruction story, to the pro-war editorial stance adopted by all 175 of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation newspapers, to the *New York Times*' startling public apology over coverage that was "not as rigorous as it should have been" (Greenslade 2003; *New York Times* 2004).

These concerns were addressed specifically in *Fahrenheit 9/11* in a sequence that opened with Moore's sardonic commentary: "fortunately, we have an independent media in this country who would tell us the truth." This commentary is followed by a montage of clips showcasing examples of the US media's unabashed support for the war. "I just want you to know, I think Navy SEALS rock!" exclaimed television host Katie Couric, in one of the more cringe-worthy cuts.

While such criticisms are valid, they do not tell the full story of how the media covered the Iraq War, and thus they provide only a limited explanation of *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s emergence. As noted in Chapter One, our media environment has become increasingly complex with different forms and genres emerging and interacting in new ways. Part of the problem here can come from the selectivity of analysis. If one focuses on Fox News or Murdoch's papers for example, then there is no surprise that certain biases might be found. However, casting the net wider, a more diverse picture emerges.

Firstly, national contexts significantly influenced the shape of coverage. Even in those nations whose governments supported the war, such as Britain and Australia, we can find evidence of the media covering a range of perspectives on the war. Couldry and Downey's (2004) analysis of the British "elite" media's coverage of the anti-war protests of 2003 indicates that there was a genuine range of pro- and anti-war voices. In Australia, allegations of bias ran both ways, with the complaints about the Murdoch press' pro-war editorial stance contrasting with an official complaint from the then Communications Minister, Richard Alston, who alleged that the public-funded Australian Broadcasting Corportation (ABC) was running an anti-US and anti-war agenda (see Bromley 2004). There is also a need to be mindful of those trans-national media services such as those offered by Al Jazeera which offered a drastically different portrayal of the war.

Developments in online news also warrant recognition when evaluating the media's reportage of Iraq. Stuart Allan has noted both the dramatic increase in internet traffic once the war began and also the growth and diversity of online coverage as the war

continued (Allan 2004; Aufderheide 2004). Allan notes the importance of this online world which "provides alternative spaces for acts of witnessing, a process which... [is] uneven, contingent, and frequently the site of intense resistance" (2004: 340). Blogs, satirical sites and discussion forums all provided outlets for the dissemination of news and opinion that was often at odds with those expressed in the mainstream media.

According to Pat Aufderheide, it is necessary to look beyond traditional sources of news when assessing the media's performance in the reporting of war and crisis "because the public opinion is powerfully shaped by the most popular media – the entertainment that pervades daily life" (2004: 334). From early 2003 onwards, prominent Hollywood actors such as George Clooney, Kim Basinger and Martin Sheen publicly expressed their opposition to the war (BBC 2003). Meanwhile, popular musicians like Bruce Springsteen, NOFX, The Offspring and Neil Young were visible in their support of the anti-War and anti-Bush movements.

The point here is not to claim that there were no problems with the way the media covered Iraq. However, if we want to understand the global success of *Fahrenheit 9/11* it is essential to recognise that, at the time of the film's release, there was already a well-established culture of dissent and opposition to the war which had found meaningful representation in the media – whether it be through the campaigning of celebrity activists, blogs or various international media. Certainly, there were troubling patterns of distortion and news media acquiescence which may have played a role in fermenting a desire for an alternative depiction of events. However, those prominent media spaces where diversity and dissent flourished also need to be

acknowledged as crucial to our understanding of how *Fahrenheit 9/11* would be received and interpreted by audiences across the globe.

Anti-American Sentiment

America's prosecution and continuation of the war in Iraq has undoubtedly fuelled widespread anti-American sentiments. Research conducted in 2005 found that public hostility towards America was at record levels across a number of nations with President Bush and the war in Iraq providing key antagonising influences (Pew 2005). These findings correspond with other research which notes the rise of anti-American feeling in various domains during recent times (see O'Connor & Griffiths 2006). These domains include opposition to American public policy – either foreign and/or domestic; a resentment of America's global cultural and economic influence; and a distaste for American culture and values (Singh 2006: 27-8).

There is much dispute over what actually counts as "anti-Americanism" and where this distinguishes itself from American-oriented criticism (O'Connor & Griffiths 2006). However, the mere existence of this phenomenon is more important for this present discussion than the problem of how we might actually understand or define it. What we can say is that the existence of widespread anti-American *sentiment* provides a crucial backdrop to the reception of *Fahrenheit 9/11* across the globe. As mentioned earlier, there was much opposition to the war at both government and public levels in many nations. This opposition to American foreign policy often supplemented other feelings of resentment towards America, whether justified or not. Michael Moore seems to have had some awareness of these feelings in the interviews he gave foreign

journalists around the time of *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s release. In an interview with the British newspaper *The Mirror*, for example, Moore described his fellow Americans as possibly "the dumbest people on the planet," while he has been quoted in German and Japanese newspapers expressing contempt for American policies and aspects of American life (qtd in Brooks 2004; Overington 2004). Such comments did not serve Moore well in his native country where they were seized upon by numerous commentators as proof of his biased agenda. However, these same comments would have undoubtedly attracted support from foreign audiences sympathetic to the view that America's influence in the world is lamentable.

Taken together, these contexts of dispute over the Iraq war, media coverage of the war and widespread anti-American sentiment provide some necessary background for understanding the way the film was received in Australia. The film rarely addresses international audiences directly. Indeed, aside from Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Afghanistan, the film's references to other national communities tends to be framed negatively, such as in the send-up of the so-called 'Coalition of the Willing'. Nevertheless, given its subject matter and the contexts just described, it is not surprising that the film attracted enormous international attention.

FAHRENHEIT 9/11 AND THE AUSTRALIAN PRESS

Gaining Access

Fahrenheit 9/11 was big news in Australia. Over a seven month period, the film or Moore, was mentioned in 531 articles across the three newspapers analysed. While

films like *Spiderman 2* (2004), *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004) and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) may have performed better at the box office, they all trailed *Fahrenheit 9/11* when it came to press exposure.[19] This volume of coverage was comparable to that afforded to the Sudanese crisis; and it was greater than that afforded to notable figures such as Yasser Arafat, who passed away in November that year, and events such as the bombing of the Australian embassy in Jakarta and the school siege in Beslan.[20]

A feature of *Fahrenheit 9/11's* coverage was the diverse range of contexts in which it appeared. It was front page news, it was buffeted back and forth between opinion columns and it was the subject of numerous critical reviews. Newspapers tend to arrange the world into easily digestible compartments – hard news at the front, sport at the back, with features, opinion columns, classifieds, and the TV guide in between. The newspapers analysed in this study followed this general trend and it was possible to count the number of stories that appeared in the following sections: news (including business and financial news and news features), opinion columns, letters (to the editor or other sections of the newspaper), and features and reviews. The distribution of stories as a percentage of the total coverage was as follows: *arts/culture features and reviews*: 295 stories (55.56 per cent); *news*: 124 stories (23.35 per cent); *letters*: 66 stories (12.43 per cent); *opinion*: 45 stories (8.47 per cent); *editorial*: 1 story (0.19 per cent). The capacity of *Fahrenheit 9/11* to transcend spaces within the newspaper offers a useful analogy for considering the film's capacity to speak across different communicative spaces within the public sphere.

[19] Based on content analyses of the three newspapers using the film titles as search terms.
[20] Based on content analyses of the three newspapers using the terms: sudan; yasser+arafat; jakarta+embassy+Australia; beslan.

The list of points below offers a summary of some of the events and themes which characterised the press coverage of *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

- Fahrenheit 9/11 wins the Best Picture award at the prestigious Cannes International Film Festival in France – a controversial selection in a year where the US-led war in Iraq has provoked immense international controversy.
- Moore claims that the Walt Disney Company opted not to distribute the film due to political concerns. Disney executives deny such claims.
- Moore says that his film will convince voters to turn against Bush.
- Fahrenheit 9/11 smashes box-office records the world over on its way to becoming the highest selling documentary of all time.
- Critics of the film dismiss it as propaganda; supporters say it may unseat Bush
- George W. Bush is re-elected as President of the United States of America.

Looking at these news-making moments we can readily identify a variety of news values which help explain the extent of *Fahrenheit 9/11*-related coverage. It involved the *power elite* (most notably George W. Bush) and *celebrities* (both Moore himself and the array of celebrities who supported the film); it *surprised* many that a documentary could do so well at the box office; its success was either *good news* or *bad news* depending on one's political perspective; and it was widely speculated that the film would have a direct bearing on the US Presidential election and perhaps even the Australian federal election (*magnitude and relevance*). These features meant that the film, and Moore, became regular reference points in the lead-up to the US election in November (*follow-ups and media agenda*) (Harcup 2004). In the case of *Fahrenheit 9/11* then, we can see a strong correspondence between contemporary

news values and the popular political documentary. For a media that is routinely drawn to celebrity, spectacle, scandal and controversy, *Fahrenheit 9/11* provided an alluring subject.

Defining Terms

The press coverage of *Fahrenheit 9/11* exhibited a fascination with one tantalising question: could a film topple a President? From the moment of its release at Cannes, the Australian press covered the film in a manner which suggested that the film may influence the 2004 US Presidential election. *The Age* sourced a story from England's *Guardian* newspaper to cover the release of the movie at Cannes. The headline read:

> Flaming hot documentary is Moore's code for 'Bush must go!' (*Age*, 18.05.2004, p.9)

The intro of the story noted Moore's hope that the film would "bring down the US Government". Other newspapers followed suit in highlighting Moore's long-term political goal: "Moore gives thanks but no merci for Bush," said *The Australian* (24.05.2004, p.3); the *Herald Sun* described the film as "a savage indictment" of the US administration (19.05.2004, p.9). This early coverage of the film, based around the Cannes Film Festival, established a key frame within which discourses informing the coverage of *Fahrenheit 9/11* would be organised. This frame was one that considered *Fahrenheit 9/11* as a major player in the US political process, if not a direct threat to President Bush. Moore outlined the nature of this threat in his description of early audience responses to the film: "People who were on the fence – undecided voters – suddenly weren't on the fence anymore" (qtd in *The Age*, 18.05.2004, p.9).

Subsequent coverage of the film noted how it "takes aim at the Bush administration" (*Australian*, 26.06.2004, p.3), in a "sustained but hilarious tirade against the Bush presidency" (*Age*, 24.5.2004, p.9). *Fahrenheit 9/11's* Australian distributor described the film as an "incendiary work" (*Herald Sun*, 28.05.04, p.29) which, according to Moore, "ignites a fire in people who had given up" (Shenon, *Age* 26.06.04, p.FP1). Moore meanwhile, is described as "the filmmaker who might help to bring down Bush..." (Anthony, *Herald Sun*, 5.06.04, W10). As that same journalist noted, "In a US election year, it's the kind of film that could make a historic difference (Anthony, *Herald Sun*, 5.06.04, p.W10).

The political potency of Moore's movie was emphasised in the language used by the Australian press to describe the film. The film was seen as a "political assault" (*Herald Sun*, 27.7.04, p. 8), "explosive", "incendiary", and "a savage indictment" (*Herald Sun*, 19.05.04, p. 9). According to a report in *The Australian*, the film was "the most damaging attack" (*Australian*, 11.09.04, p. 25) at a time when, as the headline claimed, "creative forces make Bush-bashing a fine art." Moore meanwhile was engaged in "an unceasing campaign against US President George W. Bush" (*Australian*, 24.05.07, p. 3), possessing "Bush-bashing populist guns" (Symons, *Australian*, 8.7.04, p. 1). These descriptions did not come from the opinion columns and they were couched within stories that tended to follow the conventional hard-news style of reportage. Metaphor has become a stock feature of newspaper language (Conboy 2007) and the coverage used to describe *Fahrenheit 9/11* conjures images of weapons being deployed on a battlefield or a prosecutor barraging a defendant in dock. The net result is the same: *Fahrenheit 9/11* is presented as a powerful political force.

In light of such coverage, it is worth mentioning that nowhere in the film do we hear mention of the upcoming election, nor do we hear any direct incitement to vote against Bush. This is where the timing of *Fahrenheit 9/11's* release along with the promotional publicity surrounding it can be seen to have an impact. In particular, we can find evidence of both Moore and the distributors of the film being given significant space to define the film and its impact on their own terms. Following the film's success at Cannes, *The Age* ran a story in which Moore explained that Disney was blocking distribution of the film "so that Americans don't see it before the election," while the film itself would show you things "you have never seen before, you will learn things you have never known before" (18.05.04, p. 9). An article in *The Australian* used Troy Lum, the managing director of Hopscotch Films, *Fahrenheit*'s Australian distributor, as the sole source for its story on the film's box office success and Hopscotch's plan to "make the supply of prints of *Fahrenheit 9/11* to marginal electorates a priority" (Higson, 10.08.04, p. 3). The following story presents another example:

Making Moore Money

MICHAEL Moore has joined the $US100 million ($140 million) club with his political assault *Fahrenheit 9/11* becoming the first documentary to top that mark at the US box office.

"The American people have not been given the whole story about these last three years, and they don't feel they've been given the truth from the White House," Mr Moore said yesterday.

"They've gone to the movie theatres to look for the truth, and to begin the important discussion and debate that needs to take place in this country."

The previous best gross for a feature-length documentary was $30 million for Moore's Academy Award-winning *Bowling for Columbine.*

> The polarising effect of September 11 and its aftermath, with Americans divided over Mr Bush's invasion of Iraq, boosted the public's appetite for political documentaries such as *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Control Room* and *Outfoxed*, he said.
>
> (*Herald Sun*, 27.07.04, p.8)

In the above story the commercial success of *Fahrenheit 9/11* has an enabling function which allows Moore to speak authoritatively on US politics and public culture. The examples presented here offer evidence of the ways in which Moore and the distributors of the film were able to speak prominently and with authority about the film and its impact. Their capacity to do this is worth considering in comparison to theories relating to news sources and media power. In his influential study of press coverage of mugging in England in the 1970s, Stuart Hall and his colleagues use the term 'primary definer' to describe the way the media come to rely on certain powerful spokespersons to define an issue (1978: 58). They argue that the daily rigours of professional journalism create a situation of:

> *over-accessing* to the media of those in powerful and privileged institutional positions. The media thus tend, faithfully and impartially, to reproduce symbolically the existing structure of power in society's institutional order. This is what Becker has called the 'hierarchy of credibility' – the likelihood that those in powerful or high status positions in society who offer opinions about controversial topics will have their definitions accepted... (Hall et al. 1978: 58)

Such arguments are integral to views which see the media as complicit in supporting dominant interests within society. However, the study of news sources has evolved since then, and this understanding of primary definers has been criticised for a number of reasons, including: overlooking the differences between powerful groups in defining issues; the difficulties inherent in identifying where the boundary lies between the powerful and the powerless; for underestimating the media's power in exerting influence on society's power-brokers (as opposed to the other way around);

and the extent to which actors marginal to the main corridors of political power can adopt inventive strategies of intervention to access the news media (Manning 2001: 15-17; Schlesinger 1990).

A number of these criticisms have a bearing on how we might interpret the way Moore and others were able to speak authoritatively about *Fahrenheit 9/11*. As noted previously, one of the consequences of celebrity culture and political culture becoming increasingly intertwined has been an opening up of the political agenda to new voices and a potentially broader range of viewpoints (Blumler & Gurevitch 2005). In a time where celebrities are able to speak out publicly and prominently on political issues, ideas of who belongs to society's 'powerful' or 'elite' clearly warrant some revision. This is not to say that all celebrities are able to do this effectively. However, in Moore's case, his familiarity to the media, and his capacity to spruik the film effectively is indicative of a particular cultural power that he possesses – the capacity to not only attract the news, but then define aspects of the news on his terms.

All three newspapers studied carried stories in which Moore was the sole source cited. His comments on the then Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, were reported prominently across all the newspapers sampled and made the front-page of *The Australian*:

> ..."What's confusing to me is how someone like John Howard can get in bed with George W. Bush," Moore said in a surprise intervention in Australian politics at a New York press conference yesterday.
>
> "He at least appears to have half a brain... it's really disgraceful," he said.
> "I hope that Australians that see this film will say to themselves, 'We need some regime change here in our country" ...
>
> (Symons, *Australian*, 08.07.2004, p.1)

Here we find evidence of Moore's canny promotion which ties the film more meaningfully to Australian audiences through his criticism of Howard, and through his subversive use of the phrase "regime change." An article in *The Age* covering the same story carried a longer quote which read:

> I think the Spanish started it. They threw out their prime minister who didn't listen to the will of the people and it is my sincere hope that the Australians, the Italians, the others who joined Mr Bush in this war will also be removed by the citizens of their countries. And I hope this film helps to do that.
>
> (Overington, *Age*, 07.08.2004, p.3)

Such comments reflect a strategy of political communication that appeals directly to journalists. They are localised, controversial and catchy. Alongside the references to Australian, Spanish and Italian governments above, he also described Tony Blair as "... more responsible for this war in Iraq than... George Bush" (Reuters, *Age*, 13.6.04, p.15), thus giving British journalists a nice 'hook' for their story.

Gamson and Modigliani (1989) have noted how media discourses surrounding an issue can be influenced by "sponsors" or sources who speak from a particular point of view in a way that is readily understood and easily quoted: "condensing symbols is the journalist's stock-in-trade. Smart sources are well aware of the journalist's fancy for the apt catch-phrase and provide suitable ones to suggest the frame they want" (1989: 7). In the coverage surrounding *Fahrenheit 9/11* we can find evidence of the film being promoted in ways that would appeal to journalists.

The prominence given to Moore's commentary on *Fahrenheit 9/11* supports the idea that there are strategies which allow marginal political players to access the news agenda. In the case of Moore, his status as a celebrity film-maker who had just released a record-breaking film ensured at least some level of coverage. However, the

prominence with which he was able to define the film's contribution to political debate while also linking it to more specific debates occurring within national contexts indicate the opportunities that opened up as a result of *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s popularity. For journalists, it was a story worth covering and Moore was a person worth listening to. What this tells us is that popular political documentaries need to be understood not only for the arguments they make, but also for the opportunities they create for related ideas and arguments to come into play. Here we find examples of how the magnetism of *Fahrenheit 9/11* generated a new cluster of meanings which extended beyond those offered within the film itself. To explore this in more detail, discussion will now turn to the way the film resonated within more formal political settings with a particular focus on the commentary about the film from Australian politicians, as reported in the news.

Politically Speaking

Australian politicians from all persuasions commented publicly on the film. A member of the Australian Labor Party (then in opposition) declared at the film's premiere that "it's an important movie with an important message" (Zion, *Australian*, 16.07.04, p.5). Lyn Allison, the then deputy leader of the Australian Democrats, a major 'minor' party in Australian politics at the time, said, "I was unprepared for the cynicism of the Bush Administration, and our Government by implication... If Americans can re-elect their government after this it's a shocking indictment" (Haigh & Hagan, *Age*, 25.07.04, p.15). Independent candidate, Brian Deegan, reportedly sought Moore's assistance in the foreign minister at the time, Alexander Downer, from his electoral seat (*Herald* Sun, 05.09.04, p.19). Bob Brown, the leader of the

Australian Greens, wrote a column in *The Australian* praising the film which, he argues, "turns the tables on the farce we often get when watching television debate" while seizing the chance to criticise the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, for his involvement in the war (Brown, *Australian*, 29.07.04, p.11). Meanwhile, the Prime Minister himself was drawn to comment on the film directly. While he did label the film as propaganda with "factual errors" and "no sort of objective history," he did concede that "if I get the opportunity to look at it I will" (qtd. in Nicholson, *Age*, 30.07.2004, p.3).

The film became a regular fixture in each newspaper's letters to the editor section and the commentary here often drew links between the film and Australian politics. "For the first time since the war started, I am seeing footage of the personal side of the war, real Iraqis having their homes invaded by American soldiers, real mothers with dead sons," wrote Maria Woodgate in *The Australian*. "I have just seen Mike Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* and I am very angry," wrote D. Sjoberg in the same edition, before concluding, "I have always been a Liberal supporter but now Mark Latham [leader of the Australian Labor Party] has got my vote!" (*The Australian*, 27.07.04, p. 12). In response to criticisms of the film, some readers pondered why the same scrutiny that was applied to Moore's honesty was not applied to that of governments. One *Herald Sun* reader wrote:

> If Moore deserves to be condemned for making a movie that stretches the truth, why not write a similar condemnation of the US, UK and Australian governments? Whose lies have actually cost innocent lives, anyway? (Bruce, 23.07.04, p. 16)

A letter to *The Age* expressed a similar sentiment in a relation to a piece by one of the newspaper's regular columnists, Gerard Henderson.

> Gerard Henderson complains that people are being misinformed by Michael Moore's documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* as a result of mistruths and disinformation contained within it. I seem to remember something like that happening before. I suspect, however, that Moore's film will not have quite the same lethal consequences. (Lockett, 28.07.04, p. 12)

It should be noted that the letters across the three newspapers were very much divided when it came to evaluating *Fahrenheit 9/11*, with the overall number of critical letters marginally shading the positive ones. Nevertheless, the examples cited above show there was a willingness to consider the film through the lens of Australian politics. Following Moore's criticism of John Howard, a number of letters reacted angrily to Moore's commentary on Australian politics, which came shortly after the US deputy Secretary of State, Rich Armitage, had also commented on Australia's upcoming election (*Herald* Sun, 12.07.04, p. 16; *The Australian*, 09.07.04, p. 12). These letters complemented the thrust of a *Herald Sun* editorial which stated emphatically that "Americans, Left or Right, can concentrate on their own election and butt out of ours" (09.07.04, p. 18).

The film also appeared to influence the way Australian journalists approached American politics. The movie and its maker were regularly referenced in the Australian coverage of the US election. Moore's presence at the US Republican National Convention was noted prominently by the all three newspapers. His coverage of the convention was featured in the *Australian* (04.09.04, p. 26). Coverage of the Democratic National Convention also made mention of Moore (Dalton, *Australian*, 28.07.04, p.8). Meanwhile, the efforts of both US parties to garner support from American expatriates was covered with reference to the screening of *Fahrenheit*

9/11 and its potential to influence US citizens living in Australia (Saunders, *Australian*, 08.07.04, p.2).

A number of observers also made a provocative link between *Fahrenheit 9/11* and a video released by Osama bin Laden in the days before the US election, suggesting that bin Laden may have implicitly referenced scenes from Moore's movie (Rennie & Grattan, *Age*, 31.01.04, p.1). It was a link that was referenced elsewhere by critics of the film as evidence of its insidious nature, but for the time being the point being made is that the film had again become a talking point in what was a significant global news story. In a telling depiction of Moore's perceived centrality to US politics, *The Age* newspaper's analysis of Bush's victory was filtered through a range of key questions, one of which was: "How did Michael Moore react?" (Overington, 06.11.04, p.I3)

The coverage discussed above illustrates the range of contexts in which *Fahrenheit 9/11* became a valid point of reference for the Australian press - from Australian domestic politics, to foreign affairs and the war on terror. With a federal election looming, stories appeared which noted how the film's Australian distributors were explicitly targeting marginal seats in the Australian electorate (Coslovich, *Age*, 19.8.04, p.3), and considerable column space considered whether the film would influence Australian voters (Megalogenis, *Australian*, 18.8.04, p.14, Ryan, *Age*, 01.08.04, p.16). The film had secured itself a place within that most fundamental of political debates concerning who should govern and why. The implications of this are profound, not only in relation to *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s contribution to public knowledge, but also for the ways in which we understand our media environment today.

Writing on the international success of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Brian McNair regards it as evidence of the untrammelled nature of global media flows:

> The critical message contained in the film was freely available to all who wished to access it. The competitive logic of cultural capitalism placed it at the heart of the mainstream media marketplace, regardless of the well-documented wishes of the Bush administration, the Disney corporation, or any other elite faction in the United States. (2006: 96)

As the analysis above has shown, not only was the film available, but it was also incorporated into the routine sense-making practices of Australian journalists. In short, the film was news – from the film pages through to domestic politics and foreign affairs.

The story told thus far about *Fahrenheit 9/11* points to the ways in which different media forms work together to produce certain meanings – in this case the power of a particular film to influence politics. It is also a testament to the capacity of marginal political voices to be heard within the world of official politics. The dialogue about *Fahrenheit 9/11* included journalists, politicians, the director, the distributors and ordinary citizens. Their discussion included not just the content of the film, but also commented directly on contemporary American and Australian politics.

However, this expansion of opportunities for both media and messenger necessarily means an expansion of potential opposition as well. As seen above, the 'resources' of celebrity, controversy and savvy promotion helped advance *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s status within the news agenda. However, these were not the only resources available for those who wished to comment on the film. Challengers to *Fahrenheit 9/11* also drew upon a number of cultural resources which, as will be shown below, lent their claims

considerable visibility as well. Thus, while the analysis up until this stage has explored how *Fahrenheit 9/11* came to occupy a position of prominence within the Australian press, it is now time to examine how this position was challenged.

Meanings Obscured

Firstly, it should be stated that the meanings of *Fahrenheit 9/11* are not fixed. Although the film's mode of address involved a directness which is characteristic of the documentary genre more broadly, there is still no guarantee that the messages Moore sought to communicate in this film would be the ones received by audiences. This fairly basic point about the instability of textual meaning has been a staple feature of textual analysis and theory for a number of decades, particularly when observing how texts are interpreted across different cultures (see Ang 1996; Fiske 1987; Hall 1999). We have already seen evidence of this in the way the film was interpreted within an Australian setting as having direct relevance to domestic politics. To illustrate this point further, it is worth looking at one particular analysis of *Fahrenheit 9/11* that was offered in the Australian press.

In a syndicated column which appeared in *The Age*, the British novelist and critic John Berger focuses on the conclusion of the film, which paraphrases Orwell's *1984* in an attempt to explain the current war and the exploitation of America's poor. He argues that the conclusion reached goes beyond whether or not Bush gets re-elected, but rather:

> It declares that a political economy that creates colossally increasing wealth surrounded by disastrously increasing poverty needs – to survive – a continual war with some invented foreign enemy to maintain its own internal order and security. It requires ceaseless war... Thus, 15 years after the fall of

> communism, a decade after the declared end of history, one of the main theses of Marx's interpretation of history again becomes a debating point and a possible explanation of the catastrophes being lived. (Berger, 30.08.04, p. 13)

While this may be a fair reading of the film's conclusion, this aspect of the film did not become a major talking point, at least as far as the Australian press was concerned. As discussed above, a dominant frame of the media's coverage concerned whether or not the film would influence the election. While this view was certainly promoted by Moore and the distributors of the film, it also helped push aspects of *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s argument into the background – such as the effect of the war on America's underprivileged youth. Berger's reading here points to an alternative perspective on the text that, by and large, was absent from the Australian press' representation of the film. The head of *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s Australian distributor, Troy Lum, commented specifically on this aspect of the film's Australian coverage:

> The whole film was really about class war – getting poor people to fight other poor people. And no media picked up on that. The major crux of the movie was largely ignored. I found that kind of surprising. (qtd in Boland 2004: 68)

Reviewing the coverage of *Fahrenheit 9/11* we can find other key points of the film, such as the impact of the war on terror on civil liberties (a feature that bore direct relevance to Australia as well), that were largely absent from the press coverage. This is not necessarily a criticism of the press. Rather, it seems to be a fairly understandable outcome of the encounter between the film on the one hand, and dominant news values on the other. It has become common for contemporary politics to be covered in ways that focus on the personalities involved (Conboy 2007; Street 2001). In this instance we can see how the story of *Fahrenheit 9/11* came to be framed as one man's quest to bring down a president. Such a frame inevitably meant that certain features of *Fahrenheit 9/11* would be pushed to the margins. It remains a problematic area for those wishing to influence the news agenda whereby

personalising a particular issue can increase its newsworthiness while, at the same time, the issue's nuance and breadth becomes compromised.

Documentary or Propaganda?

Media coverage of *Fahrenheit 9/11* not only concerned itself with whether or not the film could influence elections, it was also marked by questions about whether or not it should. These questions introduced another major feature of *Fahrenheit*'s coverage – the debate over whether the film constituted propaganda. On 26 June 2004, a day after *Fahrenheit 9/11's* public release in the United States and over a month before its official public release in Australia, the *Weekend Australian* (Saturday edition of *The Australian* newspaper) ran a shadowy picture of Moore on the front-page banner advertising the contents of its weekly news supplement, 'Inquirer'. The tag for the story was "Michael Moore's Lies" and it referred readers to an article titled "Sneers and Jeers" from British writer Christopher Hitchens. This article, which originally appeared in *Slate* magazine in the US ("The lies of Michael Moore") denounced *Fahrenheit 9/11* as

> a sinister exercise in moral frivolity, crudely disguised as an exercise in seriousness. It is also a spectacle of abject political cowardice masking itself as a demonstration of "dissenting" bravery. (*Australian*, 26.06.04, p. R17)

Hitchens aligns Moore with "the filmic standards, if not the filmic skills, of Sergei Eisenstein or Leni Riefenstahl" (*Australian*, 26.06.04, p. R17). While he only employs the word once (in a quote from Orwell) the charge of 'propaganda' permeates Hitchens' critique. Eistenstein and Riefenstahl are two of the most divisive and notorious figures in the history of film, due to their films' involvement in the propaganda efforts of totalitarian regimes.

Propaganda was a term used frequently in the press concerning *Fahrenheit 9/11*. A review of the film in *The Australian* was headlined "Overheated Propaganda" (Williams, *Australian*, 31.07.04, p.B23). Again, there were references to Eisenstein and Riefenstahl. Andrew Bolt, a columnist for the *Herald Sun* who wrote a number of pieces criticising Moore and *Fahrenheit 9/11* claimed that "this film – breaking box-office records in America – is so deceitful it makes the infamous *Triumph of the Will* documentary by Hitler's propagandist, Leni Riefenstahl, seem balanced" (*Herald Sun*, 21.07.04, p.19). A reviewer for the *Age* described the movie as "base propaganda as distinct from legitimate documentary" (Schembri, *Age*, 30.7.04, p. EG3). "Documentary or propaganda?" served as an opening question in Caroline Overington's coverage of the film's release in America (*Age*, 28.06.04, p.8). A number of readers' letters likewise dismissed the film as propaganda that "undermines democratic government" (Weeks, *Herald Sun*, 07.08.04, p. 28), by using "dubious methods to attack President Bush" (Connell, *Herald Sun*, 04.08.04, p. 20; see also *The Age*, 02.08.04, p. 10).

Typically, these criticisms of *Fahrenheit 9/11* appeared in reviews, opinion columns or the letters pages. It should be noted that these sections of the newspaper engage readers in diverse ways, whether by establishing the political "voice" of a particular outlet, courting controversy, speaking authoritatively, speaking satirically or a host of other possibilities (see McNair 2000; Wahl-Jorgensen 2008a). They represent spaces where the news media is at its most interpretive, seeking to explain the true essence or importance of events covered in the news (McNair 2000). Many of the accounts discussed here bore an authoritative tone that sought to analyse and explain the hype

surrounding the film before advising readers as to what the film's popularity really meant. "Loud, empty and utterly pointless," was Gideon Haigh's description of the film in *The Age* (25.07.04, p. 15) while, for Nick Cohen, in a syndicated piece from the *New Statesman*, the film was proof enough that "the left is dead" (*Age*, 17.08.04, p. 11).

The prominence achieved by *Fahrenheit 9/11* thus encountered strong resistance from those who sought to label the film as propaganda – effectively stripping it of its claim to be a documentary. The distinction here is crucial. Documentaries are widely conceived to have a beneficial and educative function in society. Propaganda does not. The findings of this study correspond with other analyses of *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s reception which have noted the propensity for critics to use the term propaganda to dismiss the film (see Porton 2004; Toplin 2006). This criticism's fundamental message is that *Fahrenheit 9/11* is a harmful and corrosive influence on political debate. It was much evident in the Australian press and it came from across the political spectrum.

Though contested definitions exist, propaganda can be defined as "the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a result that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (Jowett and O'Donnell qtd in Corner 2007: 671). This definition underplays the heavy negativity that surrounds the contemporary use of the term. As Corner argues, "the term propaganda carries a strong negative inflection in everyday use and in academic study." (2007: 669). It is a word that figured prominently in the discourse surrounding *Fahrenheit 9/11* and continues to feature prominently in public discourse surrounding

contemporary politics. Its pejorative power has made it a popular rhetorical tool for all sides in political disputes.

Democratic theory has long treasured the idea of a rational and engaged citizenry (Schudson 1998). Propaganda works against this ideal, concerned as it is with the manipulation of information and the persuasion of individuals. Rather than engaging with citizens in a reasoned and rational way, propaganda seeks more emotive ways of engaging an audience. As Nicholas O'Shaugnessey argues: "emotion is seen as the antithesis of reason, and the power of propaganda is largely in the power of its emotional appeal" (2004: 4). According to Belinda Smaill, appealing to our emotions is at the forefront of *Fahrenheit 9/11's* agenda (2006). Referring to Moore's films as well as other recent political documentaries, she argues that: "they are motivated by what might be roused at the deepest levels of desire" (2006: 51).

While the pejorative intent of describing *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s as propaganda must be acknowledged, it is interesting to note the ambiguity of the term and the extent to which theorists have argued that propaganda may actually be a *good* thing for democracies. Earlier it was noted how the increasing complexity of modern society was deemed a threat to democracy. One response to this was to promote an ideal of citizenship that was engaged intellectually but detached emotionally. As Michael Schudson argues: "reformers... tried to secure in the polling place an island of rationality amidst a rapidly changing world" (1998: 189) and "citizens were... expected to be rational sifters and winnowers of facts (1998: 196). Thus it was in the early stages of the twentieth century that the ideal of the rational, informed citizen became ascendant.

According to Hartley, the changing values attached to citizenship had the unintended effect of decreasing voter participation:

> It was the earlier carnivalesque ritual of expressing public loyalty to a partisan cause that brought voters to the ballot box, not the private calculus of rational information. And so, perversely, the elevation of the "informed citizen" produced an equal but opposite need for new devices to persuade the voter to vote at all. (Hartley 2007: 146)

Thus, Hartley argues, political campaigning using the emotive techniques of propaganda became an "internal necessity for democracies" (2007: 146). Taithe and Thornton make a similar point when they observe that "in the democratic powers of the twentieth century, definitions of citizenship were often at the heart of the propagandist's message" (1999: 12). While propaganda is still frequently linked to notions of brain-washing and mass manipulation, Taithe and Thornton argue that propaganda is actually a "two-way process... [which] works not by being simple or deceitful but in being credible or complex" (1999: 4; 12).

Such comments suggest that the emotive, propaganda-like elements of *Fahrenheit 9/11* do not necessarily discredit its contribution to the public sphere. Indeed, as Belinda Smaill argues, the passion of films like *Fahrenheit 9/11* might grant them a deeper and more meaningful engagement with a political realm that has "an emotional or affective dimension that ties us to a community or a collective identity" (2006: 52). Politics, as noted in an earlier chapter, is not just about reason and rationality; it is "also a source of affiliative passions and an object of personal desires" (Hartley 2006: 148).

Such arguments allow a different perspective over whether *Fahrenheit 9/11* is a documentary or propaganda. While critics of *Fahrenheit 9/11* undoubtedly use the term propaganda as a means of discrediting the film, the distinction they make between the documentary and propaganda may actually be a false one. Indeed it was John Grierson, one of the founding fathers of the documentary who quipped that "I look on the cinema as a pulpit and use it as a propagandist" (qtd. in Ellis 1975: 302).

Nevertheless, trying to reconcile the divide between propaganda and the documentary, which still retains the latter's sense of serving democracy, may be a futile task in our contemporary political climate. As John Hartley notes, nominating the positive virtues of propaganda can be regarded as "provocative bad taste" (2007: 145), and while he and others have attempted something of a rehabilitation of the concept, its use value beyond that of a rhetorical dismissive device must be questioned. As John Corner has argued, the use of the term 'propaganda' in analysis or critique can work to "divert attention away from some pressing questions about the pragmatics of modern political communication and about the ethics and expectations that can effectively be applied to political discourse and political journalism" (Corner 2007: 669).

Interestingly, there was some commentary surrounding the film which moved beyond the label of propaganda to reflect more broadly on these questions of ethics and pragmatics within political communication. It was noted earlier how several letters to the editor drew comparisons between the standards expected of Moore as a documentarian and those expected of political leaders when it came to truth-telling. This point was made explicitly in a piece by Bob Brown, the leader of the Australian Greens Party, who wrote in a piece titled "Whose Lies Hurt More?" that:

> Moore takes license, but his film is no match for the most fallacious polemic of the past decade: the weapons of mass destruction lie used by Bush, Howard and Tony Blair to justify the invasion of Iraq and the subsequent death toll of tens of thousands of men, women and children. (*Australian*, 29.07.04, p.11)

Although critical of the film, Jill Singer closes her review of the film by asking: "And when the masses are fed a constant diet of Right-wing propaganda, how can we wonder at the rise of the likes of Michael Moore?" (*Herald Sun*, 22.07.04, p.21). In response to such views, Gideon Haigh is highly critical:

> Quietly tut-tutting Moore's tendentiousness but praising his passion invites the question why this courtesy is not extended to, for instance, Hansonism, or works of Holocaust denial. Condoning propaganda that happens to pander to our prejudices eerily echoes that infamous tenet of American foreign policy: 'He might be a sonofabitch, but he's our sonofabitch." (Haigh and Hagan, *Age*, 25.07.04, p. 15)

Here we find debate about *Fahrenheit 9/11* extending beyond questions of fact or foreign policy to focus instead on the standards and limitations imposed on contemporary political discourse. At the same time, we can appreciate the tension that exists between the performative and spectacular modes of communication embodied in the popular political documentary and the type of communication valued and accepted within the news media. In this particular instance, *Fahrenheit 9/11* was not completely ostracised – it still had plenty of visible and vocal supporters – but neither was it completely accepted. There are parallels here with studies of marginal political groups whose often unusual or spectacular efforts at securing media coverage – colourful protests for example - can backfire if the media response turns hostile. As Paul Manning argues, "cultivated notoriety is a double-edged sword: it may purchase short-term access to the media but at the expense of long-term marginalisation" (2001: 145). In the case of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, it seems unlikely that the film would have

attracted the audiences it did had it not been for Moore's unique, though contradictory, approach (Toplin 2006). Here, we can appreciate the ambivalence of popular political documentaries, whose magnetism can both attract and repel.

CONCLUSION

Fahrenheit 9/11's contribution to public knowledge came packaged as mainstream entertainment glossed with celebrity, political satire, controversy and canny promotion. It engaged journalists, pundits, politicians, academics and ordinary citizens who were witnesses of the spectacle both within and around the film. From the success at Cannes through to Bush's re-election, the Australian press produced a 'reading' of *Fahrenheit 9/11* which saw it as a popular and potent form of political communication. It was understood as a direct threat to Bush's re-election prospects, while it also triggered speculation about its effect it on Australian politics. It came to mean these things not just because of what was in the film. The film, after all, does not mention Australia, nor does it directly reference the US election. Rather, these meanings were produced in a dialogue between the film, the promoters of the film (including Moore), and the journalists who sought to understand and convey the significance of the film to their Australian readerships. This dialogue was a by-product of the film's magnetism which also enabled part of the film's critique to flow into the press coverage where it was both magnified and dispersed, colouring debates on Australian domestic politics and foreign affairs.

At the same time, the press responded to other aspects of *Fahrenheit 9/11*: its unorthodox approach, Moore's controversial celebrity and the claims that it was

propaganda. Having been allowed into the political debate, it then faced stern questions of validity and legitimacy and was evaluated not only for what it communicated, but how.

This case study, illustrates a range of ways in which popular political documentaries can contribute to public knowledge. They take advantage of an expanded and diverse global media environment that first of all allows them a place within the commercial mainstream, where their success excites the interest of other media. In the case of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, such an environment enabled the film to speak meaningfully across different national and political contexts. It did not bring down the president, but it did get politicians talking. And, it magnified its prominence and visibility through the news media, where it attracted praise, scorn, scrutiny and debate.

The success of *Fahrenheit 9/11* and the subsequent coverage it receive suggests that the contemporary media system has a high level of tolerance for critiques of the political establishment. It certainly supports Brian McNair's idea that there is "a meaningful... plurality of voices within contemporary cultural capitalism" (McNair 2006: 100). Of course, the political establishment criticised by *Fahrenheit 9/11* represents only one wing of society's power-elite. It is thus worth considering how other popular political documentaries fared in critiquing other domains of power, in particular that possessed by corporations. The next case study will pick up on that theme by analysing the film *Super Size Me* and its high-profile attack on the McDonald's Corporation.

CHAPTER 5

SUPER SIZE ME:

CULTURE JAMMING AND AGENDA-SETTING FOR THE CITIZEN CONSUMER

That's the thing with most of these films, I think, there is no such thing as bad PR. You know, any time someone will talk about these movies, it just furthers the awareness. It furthers the desire for people to see it, and that's a positive.

Morgan Spurlock
(qtd in *CFSM* 2004)

On 14 June, 2004, *The Age* newspaper ran a front-page story under the headline "Spitting chips, McDonald's fights back – with the lot" (Dabkowski, 14.06.01, p. 1). The first sentence read:

> After many weeks of silence, McDonald's is fighting back. The fast-food company will this week embark on a multimillion-dollar advertising campaign to counter the documentary film *Super Size Me*.

The chief executive of McDonald's Australia was adamant that "If someone from America produces a film, and then comes out to Australia and attacks us, I'm not going to take that sitting down" (qtd in Dabkowski, *The Age*, 14.06.04, p. 1). Thus it was that one of the world's largest corporations found itself in a costly public relations battle with an independent low budget film by an unknown director. In Australia, the film had eclipsed the highest ever opening weekend takings for a

documentary while also attracting substantial media interest.[21] This provides some clues as to why McDonald's Australia was the first McDonald's branch worldwide to take such public, aggressive and costly action against the film. While *Fahrenheit 9/11* provided an example of how a popular political documentary could apply critical energy to the political elite, this case study offers a similar opportunity to explore what can happen when a film attacks the corporate world.

Following a brief synopsis, this chapter will examine the popular and political aspects of *Super Size Me*. This discussion introduces culture jamming as a key concept for understanding how popular political documentaries communicate about politics. Through its explicit targeting of McDonald's, *Super Size Me* capitalised on the corporation's immense global presence which rendered its message both accessible to audiences and attractive to journalists. Adding to this, the film's intensely personal approach corresponded with other forms of popular media, closely aligning the film's politics with various forms of mainstream entertainment. In examining the way the film spoke trans-nationally, it is crucial to note how the timing of its Australian release coincided with growing public concerns about obesity.

The content of the film, the context of its release and its ensuing commercial success conspired to make *Super Size Me* a newsworthy subject for the Australian press. The coverage surrounding the film broadened the scope of the obesity debate by bringing corporations like McDonald's into the frame. As will be argued below, the magnetic influence of the film was demonstrated in its capacity to act as a "trigger event" (Dearing & Rogers 1996) pushing obesity and the issue of corporate responsibility up

[21] Later eclipsed by *Fahrenheit 9/11*

the news media agenda. Furthermore, McDonald's' attempts to refute the charges made against them in the film reveal some telling insights into the way power and influence are exerted within the news media today.

Finally, this chapter concludes by reflecting on what *Super Size Me*'s magnetic influence can tell us about the contemporary representations of citizenship. As will be argued below, the film and the coverage surrounding it address audiences in a way that oscillates between the two poles of 'the citizen' and 'the consumer'. In this way, the film connects with some broader trends with contemporary political communication.

SYNOPSIS

Super Size Me is Morgan Spurlock's first film, independently produced and distributed to Australian cinemas by Dendy Films followed by a DVD release through Magna Pacific. It was released in Australia on 3 June 2004, following a successful festival run where it collected Best Director Award at Sundance and the New Director's Award at the Edinburgh International Film Festival.

The film begins with a montage of clips and graphs accompanied by Spurlock's commentary concerning America's status as "the fattest nation in the world." This dovetails into a discussion on America's fast-food eating habits and the global presence of fast food corporations like McDonald's. Pondering the role that these corporations might play in the so-called obesity crisis, Spurlock sets up an experiment in which he must eat only McDonald's food for a whole month while a team of health

experts monitor the consequences. The film tracks his month-long journey, as Spurlock crosses the country to discuss the problem of obesity and the complicity of fast food corporations with various lawyers, teachers, corporate executives, obesity sufferers, consumers, activists and children. Meanwhile, the film documents his own deteriorating physical and mental health with Spurlock gaining 13 kilograms by the conclusion of the experiment. The film ends with Spurlock summing up his critique of corporations like McDonald's and urging consumers to take matters into their own hands.

THE POPULAR AND THE POLITICAL IN *SUPER SIZE ME*

Culture Jamming in the Cinema

During the opening few scenes of *Super Size Me*, the director Morgan Spurlock frames the issue of obesity around the following question:

> Where does personal responsibility end and corporate responsibility begin?

It is a pivotal question which determines not only the direction of the film but also the ways in which it was received and interpreted by the public more broadly. Over the course of 96 minutes Spurlock mounts a compelling case against fast-food corporations like McDonald's and their culpability in the obesity crisis. While the style and tone of the film is often light-hearted, the subject of obesity registers with sobering gravity. Indeed, according to recent estimates by the World Health

Organisation, the so-called "obesity epidemic" is predicted to afflict some 700 million people by the year 2015 (WHO 2006).

Obesity's salience as a public health issue inevitably means it has become a political issue as well with governments around the world continuing to face public pressure to do something to alleviate the crisis. However, it is perhaps testament to the changing shape of contemporary politics that a political documentary like *Super Size Me* directs its critique not at governments but rather, at corporations. As Simon Cottle has argued, changes sweeping the political environment over the past few decades have led to "an expanded field of 'the political' within civil society" (2003: 6). One consequence of this expanded political field has been an increasing recognition of the political character of major corporations – whether manifest through political activism and campaigns directed *against* them, or through their own acceptance of political and social responsibilities beyond the realm of commerce and the market (see Micheletti, Follesdal & Stolle 2006; Scammell 2003). It is from within this context that we can regard *Super Size Me*'s critique of fast-food corporations as a form of political communication. In explicitly linking these corporations to the global obesity crisis, *Super Size Me* speaks to this expanded notion of the political.

The following paragraphs will explore the politics of *Super Size Me* by linking it to a mode of political activism known as culture jamming. This practice can be described as "an attempt to reverse and transgress the meaning of cultural codes whose primary aim is to persuade us to buy something or be someone" (Jordan cited in Cammaerts 2007: 71-2). It involves hijacking prominent cultural texts, with major corporations often a key target. A famous example of this was the 'Nike Sweatshop Email' which

circulated among millions of internet users while also being reported in the mainstream media. The email documented the exchanges between Nike staff and Jonah Peretti who, in an ironic form of social commentary, was trying to get the word "sweatshop" sewn onto his shoes using Nike's online service for personalising shoes (see Peretti 2001). This story, in which a serious political message coloured in a playful and ironic tone became prominent across various forms of media, has clear similarities with the ways popular political documentaries contribute to public knowledge.

In the case of *Super Size Me* the key target of critique is the McDonald's Corporation. This targeting of McDonald's is justified early in the film by law professor John Banzhaf, one of the film's many 'talking head' experts who argues that, "... it's fair to point the gun at McDonald's. McDonald's is one of the biggest, but more importantly, it is the one which – far more than any of the others – lures in young children." The targeting of McDonald's also makes sense from a narrative perspective, providing a single focus of critique in much the same way that *Fahrenheit 9/11* directs its critical energy at the sole figure of President Bush. Also, the targeting of McDonald's here allows the film to capitalise on the corporation's enormous cultural presence. As Douglas Kellner has argued:

> Few artifacts and institutions of the contemporary world are as well known and ubiquitous as McDonald's with its Big Macs, golden arches, Ronald McDonalds, promotions with tie-ins with popular films and toys, and saturation advertising. (1998: viii)

Kellner's comments here provide some insight into McDonald's' cultural power. Although principally a restaurant, McDonald's is clearly about more than just food. As Kellner again argues, "when one bites into a Big Mac they are consuming the sign values of good times, communal experience, consumer value and efficiency, as well

as the (dubious) pleasures of the product" (1998: viii). McDonald's global "I'm Lovin' it" campaign – in which food runs a distant second to the prospect of good times – is but one example of how McDonald's has actively fostered associations that extend beyond the pleasures of eating its food.

These associations are, of course, part of the McDonald's brand. A brand can be described in the following terms:

> [It] is a promise of satisfaction. It is a sign, a metaphor operating as an unwritten contract between a manufacturer and a consumer, a seller and a buyer, a performer and an audience, an environment and those who inhabit it, an event and those who experience it. (Healey 2008: 9)

According to Adam Arvidsson, brands comprise a complex and ambiguous force within contemporary society: they have become "important 'cultural resources' that people relate to as significant components of their own identities and overall life world" (2006:5 citing Elliot and Wattanasuwan 1998; Fourier 1998 and Holt 2002). Alongside their cultural value, brands have also acquired immense economic value. As Arvidsson argues:

> while the relative weight of brands in relation to other tangible and intangible assets naturally varies in different industries, there is no doubt that brand equity represents very substantial values on today's financial markets. (2006:6)

Therefore, while brands operate in the difficult to quantify world of symbolism, feelings and individual and cultural identity formation, their value can also be translated into tangible capital figures. They have been described as a kind of "virtual real estate," which "occupy a valuable position in the life-world (or to use marketing terminology, the '*minds*') of consumers" (Arviddson 2006:7 citing Schiller 1999).

Of course, it is on this very terrain of the brand that culture jammers seek to mount their challenge and voice their critiques of corporate culture. In the case of the Nike email referenced above, Nike's attempts to project messages of expressive individuality were challenged by a symbolic rendering of their exploitative employment practices. And, as noted in the above relationship between the images and meanings associated with brands and the way this translates into real capital, attacking the brand can constitute a significant challenge to corporate power. As Margaret Scammell argues, political campaigns directed against the corporate world (in which culture jamming is one of many forms of communicating) "have threatened the expensively built reputations and ultimately *the bottom lines of company after company*" (Scammell 2003: 124; emphasis added).

It is now worth looking at one of the key scenes in *Super Size Me* which corresponds with the type of brand-subversive, culture jamming activity described above. One of the conditions of Spurlock's experiment is that he must accept all offers to "super size" his meal if offered. On day two of his experiment, having just listened to health experts denounce the practice of offering consumers over-sized portions, Spurlock's excitement is nevertheless palpable when he is offered his first super size option. He sits in his car eagerly marvelling at the size of his 'super sized' french fries, coke and quarter-pounder. His role in the film is often cast as the naïve consumer; he remarks at one point that he might just be pursuing every eight-year-old kid's dream diet.

As he starts working his way through the meal, his gleeful astonishment over how much food he has gives way to the somewhat troubled observation: "that's a lot of

food, man... this is like a workout." After ten minutes, Spurlock looks uncomfortable as he comments:

> Now's about the time you get the McStomach-ache, you get the McGurgles in there, you get the McBrick, and you get the McStomach-ache. Right now I got some McGas that's rockin'... I feel like I got some McSweats goin', my arms have got the McTwitches goin' on here from all of the sugar that's goin' in my body right now... I'm feelin' a little McCrazy.

In service of the experiment, Spurlock continues to eat. After 22 minutes, while still eating, he glares ruefully at the camera, a portion of burger still in his hand... and then he vomits out the window.

Writing for *The Australian*, Emma Tom commented on this particular scene:

> Not everyone can change the world by regurgitating a hamburger and fries out a car window...
>
> But when US film-maker Morgan Spurlock tries and fails to consume his first super-sized McDonald's meal in his new documentary, he produces a bunch of DIY golden arches that will leave McDonald's executives feeling decidedly off-colour. (02.06.04, p. 11)

The sequence, shot on a portable video camera, has a sense of unscripted, home video authenticity that is far removed from the usual bright imagery associated with McDonald's. Spurlock is clearly not 'lovin' it.'

This sequence is just one of the many ways in which *Super Size Me* seeks to re-define McDonald's presence within contemporary culture. The film features the art of Ron English whose works critically embed icons of consumer culture (i.e. Ronald McDonald, Mickey Mouse, King Kong) within classical art. For example, English's re-working of Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, replete with the McDonald's 'golden arches' on top of the church, appears in a segue to discussions about the "toxic environment"

that fast-food culture creates. English later appears as a talking head himself, discussing the pervasive influence of corporate culture:

> The way I look at it is like Cezanne was inspired by a mountain he saw out his window, but when I look out my window, I see no mountains, I just see billboards and advertisements... so I use them as my inspiration.

Aside from his paintings, English is also noted for his culture jamming efforts in re-working billboards in America and overseas. One of his more famous works was the hijacking of an Apple billboard campaign by painting an image of the murderous cult-leader Charles Manson alongside their brand slogan "think different." This reclamation of public space is characteristic of the culture jammer's endeavour to resist corporate and consumerist encroachment into our everyday lives. The Australian DVD release of *Super Size Me* includes another English work on the cover; a grinning and grossly overweight Ronald McDonald sporting some 'bling' in the form of a dollar-sign necklace.

The popularity of *Super Size Me* gave its brand-subversive message a degree of visibility which would be the envy of many a culture jammer. This diverse practice, described as "media hacking, information warfare, terror-art and guerrilla semiotics, all in one" (Dery qtd in Cox 2001) relies on a high level of visibility – the more people that see or hear the particular message, the more damaging the attack can be for the corporation in question. The history of the documentary is littered with examples of images being re-worked and messages being re-fashioned to suit a particular political agenda. Films such as *The Atomic Café* (1982), a compilation of government 'safety' films about atomic energy, involved the ironic subversion, or 'jamming', of government propaganda. In the previous case study, we saw how *Fahrenheit 9/11* sought to undermine the president's image of authority and

leadership through the mischievous use of out-takes and suggestive music. The subversion or transgression of dominant cultural codes is one of the hallmarks of the popular political documentary. Such strategies cogently express their oppositional quality. As examples of cinematic culture jamming, popular political documentaries are unique insofar as their popularity lends their subversive messages a high degree of visibility and, rather than occupying the fringes of political and cultural expression, they are produced and distributed through the channels of the mainstream media.

One of the film's key platforms for delivering its political message about fast food corporations is offered in the representation of the physical and mental toll that the McDonald's diet inflicts on Spurlock's body. Although supplemented by arguments, experts and other methods of persuasion this symbolic confrontation with the McDonald's brand is characteristic of the ways in which these films engage politics more broadly. The film invites shock, repulsion and the macabre fascination of Spurlock's bodily health being objectified, surveyed and ultimately punished over the course of the film. At one stage Spurlock's general practitioner advises him that his liver is being turned into "paté" and the narrative tightens towards the end of the film as the experts concede that Spurlock is facing potentially irreparable damage – maybe even death. Alongside its intimacy, its humour and its connection with popular media, this focus on Spurlock's body speaks to the affective nature of politics and citizenship, inviting political engagement through entertainment. As Spurlock noted in an interview following the film's release:

> ... from the very beginning, it was important to create a movie that not only provided a vast amount of information and really made people start to think, but also, on a level, didn't preach to them, was entertaining. You know, like the Mary Poppins song, "a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down." That was kind of our goal from the beginning – to create something that would provide a balance for the viewer. (qtd in *CFSM* 2004)

The following discussion will look more closely at how *Super Size Me* attempted to both inform and entertain, and how it came to exert a magnetic influence on the Australian press. The issues to be discussed include the influence of Michael Moore on the both the market for *Super Size Me* and its aesthetics, as well as examining the film's connections with other forms of popular media and its use of children and experts as key rhetorical devices.

Moore Influence

To understand the production and reception of *Super Size Me* it is necessary to acknowledge the substantial impact of Michael Moore. As noted in the previous chapter, Moore is a figure of much controversy whose success and influence is celebrated in some quarters and bemoaned in others. What is beyond dispute is that his commercial success has re-drawn expectations surrounding the documentary's popular appeal and potential profitability. His influence is acknowledged by Spurlock who has conceded that:

> ... if it wasn't for Michael when I filmed *Super Size Me* it wouldn't have made it into theatres, I mean if it hadn't been preceded by things like *Roger & Me* and *Bowling for Columbine* and I think he opened up the door for a lot of filmmakers. He makes it easier for the rest of us to raise money! (qtd. in Edwards 2008)

Produced on a budget of $US65 000, Spurlock's film went on to gross over $US20 million worldwide, becoming the ninth highest grossing documentary of all time. Spurlock's comments here provide some indication of Moore's influence on the documentary's commercial environment. According to Eugene Jarecki, director of *Why We Fight* (2005), Moore has played a crucial role in creating a viable marketplace for politically edged documentaries (qtd in Jolliffe & Zinnes 2006: 422).

Such commentary constitutes anecdotal evidence of the influence Moore has had on the genre and goes some of the way towards explaining how a low budget and controversial film like *Super Size Me* acquired cinematic distribution. However, it would be simplistic to attribute all the influence to Moore here. As Pat Aufderheide (2005) and others (see Arthur 2005 and Docurama 2005) have argued, the market for documentary film has been steadily expanding since the 1990s. Aufderheide cites a diverse range of influences, including: the rise of cable television with vast channel space to fill; a general cultural "hunger for authenticity" manifest not only in box office documentary sales, but also in the increasing popularity of talkback radio, fashion, evangelical movements and, we could add, reality television; a flourishing festival circuit that connects films and film-makers with studios and distributors; and the rise of DVD technology and the internet, which have changed both the marketing and distribution models for contemporary documentary production (2005: 24-26). Taken together, these factors help explain the general changes in the documentary marketplace which have seen more documentaries getting produced, distributed, and turning a profit.

While Moore's influence on *Super Size Me*'s commercial environment is difficult to quantify, a more visible indicator of his influence can be found in the style of the film. Like the films of Moore, *Super Size Me* relies on an intensely personal approach whereby Spurlock talks about his childhood, replete with old family snaps, while we also see him being poked and prodded by doctors. We hear candid confessions from his girlfriend about their sex life and we listen in on emotional exchanges between Spurlock and his mother. There is a sequence towards the end of the film where Spurlock tries in vain to get in contact with a McDonald's representative, which is

reminiscent of Moore's attempts to get an audience with the General Motors chairman Roger Smith in *Roger & Me*.

According to film scholar Paul Arthur, "Moore's shadow looms large over *Super Size Me*," an example of the first person approach to documentary which Arthur describes as "the decade's most inventive new genre" (2005: 21). It is a genre which relies on the centrality of the film-maker who, in turn, creates a portrait of reality that is openly and unashamedly subjective. Those responsible for marketing *Super Size Me* were able to capitalise on Moore's success and its stylistic proximity. The back cover of the Australian edition of the DVD (distributed by Dendy Films) includes a quote from a Fox News review which dubs the film "the *Bowling for Columbine* of fast food." Clearly, the viewers were being encouraged to approach the movie with a similar set of expectations to that of watching a Moore film.

Considering the above, it is not surprising that comparisons between Moore and Spurlock became a part of the press coverage of *Super Size Me*. A *Herald Sun* feature introduces Spurlock as a "fast-food daredevil and Michael Moore-in-training" (Johnson, 3.6.04, p. I5). Such comparisons were sometimes framed negatively, with one reviewer lamenting that,

> ... while Spurlock takes some fat chances with his health, *Super Size Me* swells into little more than a *Bowling for Columbine* for the *Jackass* set, where the meatier issues surrounding poor dietary habits are deep-fried by a shamelessly self-abusive stunt. (Paatsch, *Herald Sun*, 27.05.04, p. 045)

On the other hand, Emma Tom of *The Australian*, compared Spurlock favourably to Moore in observing that

> *Super Size Me*, which opens in Australian cinemas tomorrow and should be mandatory viewing for all burger eaters, has been compared to the work of

> *Bowling for Columbine's* Michael Moore. But it's far superior. The other fat bastard of American documentaries is funny and worthy, but his blatant agenda-mongering leaves him vulnerable to claims that he's playing loose and fast with the facts.
>
> Spurlock on the other hand, seems completely non-partisan about his target. In fact his childish excitement at the prospect of eating nothing but Maccas for a month is quite endearing. (02.06.04, p. 11)

Of course it is natural for the work of different film-makers to be compared. What is interesting here is how the comparisons are between the on-screen 'performances' of the directors. As noted in the previous chapter, the issue of performance is vital to our understanding of popular political documentaries. In much the same way that a politician's success can be measured by the appeal of his or her personality, popular political documentaries come to be evaluated by the appeal of their 'star' directors. Such conditions comprise a two-edged sword: the 'star' director has the capacity to symbolise and personify a complex range of political and emotional attachments; however, the potency of the documentary's political message can often be diluted or neutralised if the star's personality is deemed unappealing or unpalatable. As seen in the examples given above (and in the preceding chapter), there is a tendency to frame the effectiveness or worthiness of popular political documentaries according to the perceived effectiveness or worthiness of their central protagonists. This theme will be revisited in the following chapter.

Popular Connections

According to Brian McNair, the success of "first-person documentaries" is a reflection of "a cultural environment of fluidity and uncertainty, a world where there is acknowledged to be no absolute truth, just a plurality of vantage points, of which the *auteur*'s is only one" (2006: 12). In each of the films analysed in this thesis, we

find an example of this personalised, subjective approach which, as McNair suggests, corresponds with broader cultural trends. Paul Arthur argues that these first-person documentaries belong to the same "sphere" of media as:

> ... blogging, WebCam sites, literary memoirs, and low-end reality television shows. They include a gritty DIY sensibility that privileges gestures of intimacy and confession; construing personal identity as an effect of self-conscious, albeit quotidian or casual, performance: an assumed interpenetration of 'public' and 'private' experience; and the acceptance of 'simulation' as unproblematic bearer of reality. (2005: 19)

We could now add social networking sites to this growing media space that privileges the individual voice and further destabilises the boundary between public and private worlds. *Super Size Me* arguably goes further than Moore's works in terms of making the individual the focus of the film. Spurlock effectively turns his body into a personification of the obesity crisis, of the 'sickness' that has gripped America, as he emulates the unhealthy eating habits and sedentary lifestyle which are deemed to be major causes/symptoms of this issue (more on this later). In concocting such an experiment, *Super Size Me* closely aligns itself with a genre of reality television which relies on putting individuals in contrived circumstances and filming the consequences (i.e. *Big Brother*, *Survivor* and *Jackass* among others).[22] Such parallels bring the film closer to the realm of mainstream entertainment which, apart from widening its potential audience, also has implications for the ways in which viewers might engage with the text. This issue will be explored in more detail later in analyses of the Australian press response to the film.

In examining *Super Size Me*'s highly personalised approach, it is necessary to acknowledge the relationship between this style and the technology which makes such

[22] Indeed, it was interesting to note the direction of Spurlock's career following *Super Size Me* which involved hosting the television series *30 Days* which recorded the experiences of individuals who were placed in radically different environments for a 30 day period.

an approach possible. Smaller cameras, better sound recording equipment, the availability of computer editing software are just some of the general changes in technology which have enabled small budget documentaries like *Super Size Me* to be produced. According to Corner and Rosenthal, these technological changes paved the way for the stylistic changes outlined above insofar as they, "helped break the rigid demand of the prescripted sequence, encouraged the creation of the documentary in the editing room itself, and brought a more colloquial, personal voice to the form" (2005: 4).

Spurlock has argued that new technology has "levelled the playing field in every way" allowing movies like his to get made and then reach an audience (qtd in *CFSM* 2004). Another interesting connection here between style and technology in the case of *Super Size Me* is in the claim that the film may well be the first "Web-inspired documentary" (McCreadie 2008: 133). According to Marsha McCreadie, Spurlock's professional background in web-based media production is evident in the structure and style of the film which, she argues, mimic an internet environment where "images pile upon each other, superimposed, and not cancelling others by a wipe or cut" (2008: 133).[23]

In attacking McDonald's, *Super Size Me* joined a long line of prominent and popular media that criticise corporate culture: from the *McLibel* documentaries (1997 and 2005), to the work of Moore discussed previously; best-selling books like Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (2001; later made into a film of the same name) or Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (2000), magazines like *Adbusters*, other documentaries like

[23] Spurlock's follow-up film *Where in the World is Osama bin Laden?* (2008) is noteworthy in this regard for the video game motif that runs throughout the film. See the Conclusion for further discussion on this.

The Corporation (2003), Hollywood films like *Fight Club* (1999), and the anti-corporate stances of bands like Bad Religion and Rage Against the Machine.

This particular discussion of *Super Size Me*'s popularity has touched upon some of the connections between this film and other forms of popular media – popular in the sense that they are widely used and accessible. Such an approach undoubtedly enhanced the film's commercial appeal while also making its critical message accessible and entertaining for a broad audience. We saw similar strategies at work in *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s referencing of celebrities and popular music and television shows. Across the two case studies assessed thus far, we can therefore see clear lines of correspondence between the aesthetic style of these films and dominant trends within popular culture. This is one of the trademarks of the popular political documentary.

Experts and Children

In the early stages of *Super Size Me*, Spurlock lays out the terms of his experiment:

- 30 days of nothing but McDonald's food
- only eat what is available over the counter
- must super size if offered
- must eat everything on the menu at least once

He then introduces a series of experts who become pivotal to the film's critique: "I knew if I was going to do this [eat only McDonald's food for a month], I was going to need some serious medical supervision," Spurlock narrates, "so I enlisted the help of

not one, but three, doctors – a cardiologist, a gastroenterologist and a general practitioner." A montage ensues in which Spurlock's body is poked, prodded, tested and assessed. While leavened with humour, this sequence is vital insofar as it signifies the extent to which Spurlock's physical body has become a subject of the film in a way that is almost distinct from Spurlock the person. In providing candid glimpses into the private world of doctor-patient relationships (a world becoming less private in the wake of 'reality hospital' programs), the sequence encourages greater intimacy between Spurlock and his audience.

It is worth noting that the medical sequence also encourages a certain distancing effect – insofar as control over Spurlock's body is submitted to 'the experiment' and knowledge over his body is deferred to 'the experts'. While we are asked to identify with Spurlock the person, we are also asked to acknowledge the authority of medical science in relation to his health and wellbeing. Of course, the deferral to experts, particularly with regards to health and medicine, is common across the media spectrum (see Seale 2002). Within the *Super Size Me* text, this deferral brings Spurlock closer to the audience as we share his alarm and concern about the dramatic effects that the McDonald's diet has on his health.

While the experts supply the film with authority and the authenticity of interpreting Spurlock's deteriorating health, the sense of outrage that drives the film's critique is very much channelled through the figure of the innocent child. No scene in *Super Size Me* illustrates the depth of McDonald's' cultural reach more than the one in which young school children are shown portraits of famous people and asked to identify each one. While the kids are left scratching their heads at portraits of Jesus Christ or

George W. Bush, their eyes alight with recognition when shown a picture of Ronald McDonald. Within a narrative that paints McDonald's as the primary villain, it is the children who emerge as the innocent victims. As noted earlier, the film provides experts who critique McDonald's' targeting of children. These claims, offered alongside an examination of the McDonald's culture of Happy Meals, playgrounds, cartoon characters and promotional tie-ins, comprise a compelling critique.

The figure of the innocent child carries immense rhetorical weight. Henry Jenkins has argued that there is a "mythology" of the innocent child which has been deployed in almost all major political debates of the twentieth century – from campaigns for economic reform, to the civil rights movement to contemporary concerns about the influence of new media (1998: 2). These debates are characterised by an emphasis on taking action to protect our children (Jenkins 1998: 2). The role of the media has also been noted here, insofar as media depictions of children are seen to "involve an intensification of scare-villain themes, juxtaposed with images of the innocence and vulnerability of children, and fuelled by a perception of their extreme social value" (Seale 2002: 120). *Super Size Me*'s portrayal of children's culture as almost hopelessly enthralled by McDonald's provides a potent example of such representations.

Exploring how *Super Size Me*'s representation of children corresponds with this mythology of the innocent child is not intended to imply that there is some form of misrepresentation occurring. On the contrary, the point is to illustrate how the film's portrayal of children resonates with powerful cultural ideas and was thus likely to receive sympathetic judgments. Responses to Super Size Me in the Australian press

provided a number of examples here. Columnist, Pamela Bone, referenced the film in her opinion piece in *The Age* about childhood obesity titled "The health of our kids is at stake" (6.05.04, p. 9). In the same newspaper Patricia Edgar's article, "Super Size Australia" wrote:

> There you have the crux of the problem that has led to the obesity epidemic – irresponsible marketing, advertisements for toys tied in with the products at hand and children a vulnerable target for such a seductive marketing package. (The Age, 22.06.04, p. 11, emphasis added)

The link between advertising and childhood obesity remains a contested area for both researchers and policy-makers (Sinclair & Wilken 2007). In *Super Size Me*, obesity researcher Kelly Brownell notes that American children are exposed to 10,000 food advertisements per year, 95 per cent of which advertise "junk food" (sugared cereals, soft drinks, fast food and candy). He compares this to the opportunities that parents have to reinforce healthy eating habits by eating with their children every day. He concludes that "it's not a fair fight," employing an argument based on a belief in advertising's ability to influence children's behaviour. While the research is far from conclusive in this area, Brownell's argument resonates with public discourse in many countries (e.g. USA, Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain) which is characterised by various campaigns to protect children from the perceived evils of advertising (see Boyce 2007; Sinclair & Wilken 2007).

The targeting of McDonald's, the deferral to experts and the figure of the innocent child provide the main pegs for *Super Size Me*'s critique. It is a structure that allows Spurlock to act as a discoverer and interpreter of 'truths' rather than lead prosecutor. It is through such means that the films mounts its critique of corporate culture and, as will be argued below, it was a critique that resonated across national borders.

SPEAKING TRANS-NATIONALLY

> *Everything's bigger in America. We've got the biggest cars, the biggest houses, the biggest food and, finally, the biggest people. America has now become the fattest nation in the world. Congratulations.*

This piece of narration marks the beginning of *Super Size Me* and, together with an image of fluttering American flag, it efficiently establishes the film's American-focused mode of address. Although the global reach of both the McDonald's Corporation and the obesity crisis are mentioned in this introductory sequence, the film as a whole remains firmly attached to its national setting. As noted in the previous chapter, such parochialism, which is common across American cinema, does not necessarily restrict the capacity of these films to speak meaningfully across national borders. Indeed, as will be argued below, *Super Size Me*'s targeting of the McDonald's Corporation and the subject matter of obesity ensured it would have an international audience, particularly in countries like Australia where obesity had become a major public health issue.

Targeting Maccas

While its American roots cannot be discounted, an integral feature of McDonald's success has been its ability to transcend national and cultural borders. McDonald's currently has over 31,000 restaurants operating in 119 countries across six continents (McDonald's Canada 2007). From Jakarta to Jersusalem, McDonald's has proven its

enormous capacity for global success and cultural translation. Indeed McDonald's has come to be regarded by many as one of *the* quintessential symbols of globalisation (see Alfino et al. 1998; Ritzer 1998, 2006).

The cultural influence of McDonald's has inspired the sociological term – 'McDonaldization' – which refers to trends shaping diverse cultural domains: from contemporary work practices and bureaucracies, through to cultural production and education, among others (Ritzer 1998, 2006). The mere existence of this term, and the debate it has engendered (Alfino et al. 1998) offers another indicator of McDonald's' immense cultural presence. In this way, there are also important links to be drawn between the previous chapter's discussion of anti-American sentiments and critiques of McDonald's, which often espouse similar fears about American corporate and cultural hegemony (see O'Connor & Griffiths 2006). For the purposes of this discussion, it is worth acknowledging that *Super Size Me*'s explicit focus on McDonald's enabled it to capitalise on the corporation's enormous global prominence and visibility, while also tapping into some of the concerns listed above. This is an essential point to remember when assessing *Super Size Me*'s reception within Australia, and to explore this idea further it is necessary to describe the place of McDonald's within Australian society.

McDonald's, or Maccas as it is more colloquially known, arrived in Australia in 1971 and there are now over 760 restaurants across the country. In many ways, the story of McDonald's in Australia has been one of growth and success. Bryan S. Turner has argued that the culture of McDonald's (it's food, it's method of production, marketing and distribution) "is highly compatible with a society [Australia] that has embraced

egalitarianism to such an extent that cultural distinction is explicitly rejected in such popular expressions such as 'to cut down tall poppies' and by the emphasis on mateship" (2006: 302). According to McDonald's Australia, McDonald's restaurants currently serve around 1.5 million customers daily (2009). It is worth noting that a number of changes in McDonald's practices have been initiated in Australia – the McCafe was first trialled in Melbourne in 1993 and the Salads Plus menu was first launched in Australia in 2003 before being exported elsewhere (McDonald's Australia 2009; Williams 2004). In April 2004, McDonald's appointed Australian Charlie Bell as its president and chief executive – the first non-American to hold such a post (Jackman 2004). It was in many ways symbolic of the close affinity between McDonald's and Australian culture.

As noted above, the culture of McDonald's is seen to blend easily with Australian culture insofar as Australian society is deemed to be more egalitarian and less culturally stratified than other nations. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note the ways in which McDonald's has sought to deepen its connections with Australian culture – particularly with regards to its advertising and marketing. A former president of McDonald's once claimed that McDonald's' policy for global expansion is to "become as much a part of the local culture as possible" (qtd in Watson 2006: 194). We can find evidence of such a policy in the ways McDonald's markets itself to the Australian public.

There is a long tradition within Australia of products, corporations or individuals winning or losing public favour according to the level of synergy they can establish between their own image and prevailing discourses of Australian identity (see Turner

1994). A cursory look at McDonald's advertising in Australia reveals concerted attempts to embed McDonald's within Australian culture: from Aussie country music legend Lee Kernaghan strumming his guitar around a campfire singing about "the great Australian taste" of the *McBeefsteak*, TV personality Kerri-Anne Kennerley promoting McHappy Day, to McDonald's sponsoring the Australian Football League.[24]

In their study of Australian television advertising in the 1980s, Noel King and Tim Rowse analyse a genre of advertising known as 'humanity ads': "advertisements whose principal ideological work is not to constitute viewers as distinct individuals but as members of a (distinctively Australian) common humanity" (1990: 38). Among the characteristics of these humanity ads is the portrayal of large groups of "ordinary" people who often respond directly to the camera. The narrative of these ads is described as "a loose mosaic, made up of the juxtaposition of a series of similar, but diverse, human images" (King and Rowse 1990: 38). The underlying premise is that "the ad is calculated not to *describe* a good but to *identify* a product, a sentiment or a service with an imagined community, diverse but essentially unified" (1990: 39; emphasis in original). It is suggested by Alvarado and Thompson that such a genre of advertising is "possibly unique to Australia" (1990: 36). The significance of the advertisements studied by King and Rowse is that they alert us to what can be regarded as something of a template for successful advertising, marketing and public relations in Australia. More recent McDonald's advertisements timed to coincide with the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games have referenced an ethnically diverse community

[24] Viewed on *YouTube*: (http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=mcdonalds+commercial+australia&search_type=&aq=f)

that is nevertheless united by a love of sport and achievement in the international arena.[25]

Despite an overall trend of growth and expansion, it is worth noting that the years prior to *Super Size Me's* release in Australia were marked by signs that McDonald's' dominance of Australia's fast-food market was under threat. In her analysis of Australian food culture, Joanne Finkelstein (2003) notes a change from the mid-1990s onwards in which Australians were becoming more interested in healthier alternatives to fast foods. She quotes from interviews with Australian McDonald's executives which found that "sales growth has stalled, satisfaction is falling, fascination is at a standstill, the remarkably high market share is under pressure and dissatisfaction... is building" (Dore et al. 2001 cited in Finkelstein 2003: 189). McDonald's was experiencing a slump worldwide during the early 2000s, with its share price falling by 60 per cent between 1999 and 2002 (Jackman 2004). It should be noted however, that there were some signs of McDonald's fortunes improving in Australia at least, with an upturn in profit recorded from 2002 to 2003 (Williams 2004).

The preceding paragraphs suggest that *Super Size Me*'s targeting of McDonald's operated on two levels within an Australian context. First of all, McDonald's prominent cultural position lent *Super Size Me* a high degree of translatability which was readily digested within an Australian setting. [26] Secondly, the criticisms contained within the movie coincided with a growing sense of customer dissatisfaction with McDonald's in Australia, indicating perhaps that such criticisms would receive a sympathetic reception.

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[25] viewed at http://au.youtube.com/watch?v=MPhmBsd2Gwc

[26] This was in spite of the fact that the term "super size" had no prior relevance in Australia as this was never an option for customers in Australia

The Obesity Crisis

At the time of *Super Size Me*'s release in Australia, obesity had grown to become a major public health issue. According to the federal government's National Obesity Taskforce the Australian media "ran hot with overweight and obesity articles during 2004, with both Australian and overseas issues and initiatives under the spotlight" (2005: 2). Furthermore, it became increasingly common in 2004 for the media to talk of an obesity "crisis" or "epidemic" (e.g. see Pawlaczek 2004; Green & Tomazin 2004; Canning 2004; AAP 2004). Indeed, across the three newspapers analysed in this study, there was a 60 per cent increase in stories which featured the word "obesity" from 2003 to 2004 (557 stories in 2003; 905 stories in 2004 – see Figure 1 below).[27]

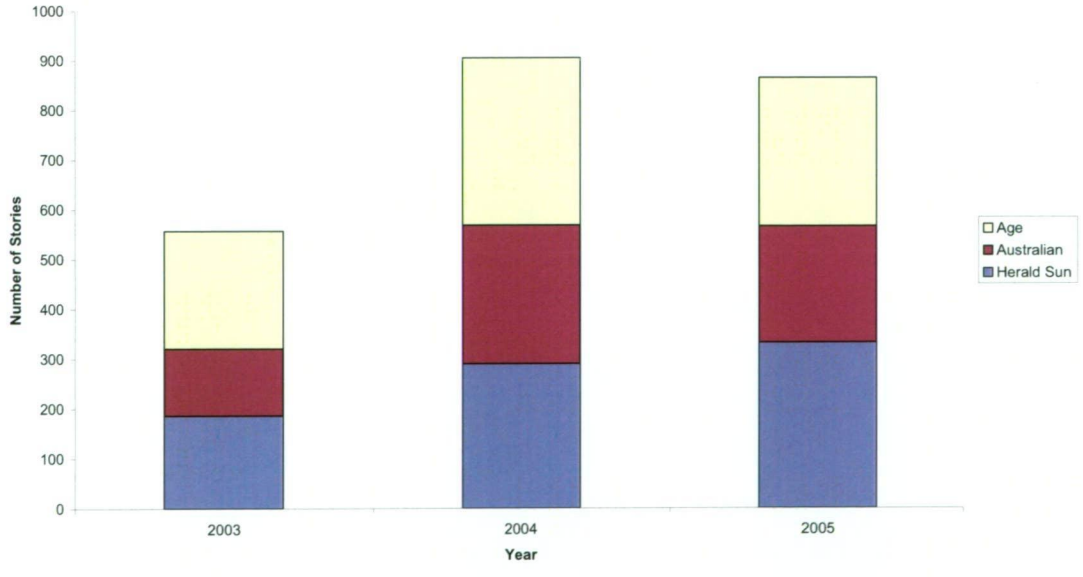

Figure 1. **Obesity coverage in the Australian press 2003-2005**

[27] Based on a search for "obesity" across the three newspaper databases.

The issue of junk food advertising to children had become a matter of parliamentary debate following a proposal by the Australian Labor Party (then in opposition) to ban all junk food advertising on children's television (Yaxley 2004). In an election year, these proposals, which were opposed by the government, became a springboard for debates not only about the influence of advertising, but also about political leadership (Maiden, *Australian*, 18.06.04, p. 6).

The preceding paragraphs show how *Super Size Me*'s release in Australia coincided with increasing concerns about the rise of obesity. For a nation proud of its sporting prowess and supposed love for the outdoors and an active way of life, the problem of obesity loomed as a scandalous blight on the national consciousness. With dispute among elites, a spurt in media coverage and the use of evocative terms like "epidemic", it was clear that obesity had acquired some of the hallmarks of a crisis, which in turn had a significant bearing on the way *Super Size Me* was received and interpreted by the Australian press.

Crises are complex phenomena. Much has been written about the way crises are labelled and elaborated on within the media (see Cottle 2009; Couldry & Downey 2004; Raboy & Dagenais 1992). Without offering a full overview of this literature, it is worth considering a few key aspects of the relationship between crises and the media. Firstly, the media have a key role in creating crises, defined broadly here as the "disruption, real or perceived of the social order" (Raboy & Dagenais 1992: 3). Though the media respond to actually occurring events it is their labelling of certain situations as crises which is integral. As Raboy and Dagenais argue:

> the very labelling of some situation as a 'crisis' is itself an ideological and political act. So is the failure to attribute a crisis to a particular situation. Making these choices and structuring the way they are presented in the public sphere has become one of the essential functions of the mass media. (1992: 3)

Thus when looking at the relationship between crises and the media it is essential that we bear in mind the media's constitutive role.

Secondly, crises are inherently newsworthy. The very word crisis invokes conflict and struggle, as well as speculation about an uncertain future. They are often imbued with a sense of drama that lends them prominence within any news agenda. Accordingly, it could be argued that portraying an event or issue as a crisis is in the media's interest as it allows them to draw upon the rich vocabulary of conflict and struggle, while insistently claiming that the issue at hand is of immense public interest. This, of course, can then translate into higher audiences or readerships. The commercial appeal of such representations have arguably intensified in recent times as competition between media outlets increases as audiences fragment and new sources of information become available (McNair 2006). One only has to look at the recent history of swine flu, the Y2K bug, anthrax attacks or SARS to see cases where the media's representation of a crisis may have outstripped the scale of the threat, highlighting how the media can sometimes generate disproportionate senses of risk and fear within a community (McNair 2006; Seale 2002).

This tendency leads us to consider the blurred lines between crises and "moral panics" in which the identification of a particular societal 'evil' leads to widespread public concern, which fuels demands for tighter controls in order for the identified 'evil' to be exorcised or overcome (Cohen 1973; Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994). In relation to

obesity, at least one study has found a tendency for exaggeration and alarmist reports within the media (Boyce 2007). This is blamed on both journalists and scientists who have an influence on how the studies are reported. For some theorists, the media's predilection for bombarding audiences with tales of threat and woe has an anti-democratic function, whereby "media consumers will tend to make loyal subjects" (Raboy & Dagenais 1992: 12).

On the flipside, a number of researchers have argued that crises can, under certain conditions, actually serve a progressive function by opening up the media agenda and diversifying debate (Cottle 2009; Couldry & Downey 2004). According to these ideas, crises can be characterised by a heightened level of dispute and disagreement within a society's elite which can potentially allow more peripheral actors a chance to be heard (Couldry & Downey 2004: 268). As will be shown below, the parliamentary disputes about obesity between the Australian government and opposition during the time of *Super Size Me*'s release represented a substantial conflict between the political elite. As one report noted, "fast food consumption has become a key point of difference between the two parties in the lead up to the next federal election" (Tobler, *The Australian*, 26.06.04, p. 4). This dispute extended to the opinion columns of various newspapers where various experts weighed in with their own solutions and interpretations of the problem (e.g. Bone, *The Age*, 5.06.04, p. 9; Tobler, *The Australian*, 26.06.04, p. 4; Fotinopoulos, *Herald Sun*, 15.06.04, p. 21). According to the above views, this dispute between elites may therefore signal a more open media agenda and an opportunity for a film like *Super Size Me* to achieve a prominent footing.

As the above paragraphs illustrate, crises are complex and contradictory phenomena, particularly when it comes to their relationship with the media. In many ways, this corresponds with the points made in an earlier chapter about the complexity of the contemporary media environment more generally. There is no particular set of rules that will help us predict with certainty the way the media will respond to a crisis. As Simon Cottle has argued in relation to global crises:

> *Complexity* and *dynamism*, *contention* and *discursive openings* as well as *dominance* and *stasis*, *consensus* and *representational closure* can *all* variously characterize the field... (2009: 167, emphasis in original)

For the purposes of this study, we should therefore be wary of the ways in which the media/crisis relationship can potentially intensify the magnetic influence of popular political documentaries in some circumstances, while restricting it in others. Only through closer empirical observation can we extend our conclusions beyond this. In the previous case study, it was shown how *Fahrenheit 9/11* was covered prominently by the Australian press during a time of substantial dispute and debate about the Iraq War. It is now time to look more closely at how *Super Size Me* fared.

SUPER SIZE ME IN THE AUSTRALIAN PRESS

The Scope of Coverage

The Australian press coverage of *Super Size Me* can be broken down into a number of categories. Firstly, there were stories that preceded the film's arrival in Australia – focusing either on the film's festival success, responses to the film from McDonald's US, or promotion of the film's release in Australia (Coorey, *Herald Sun*, 24.01.04, p.9; Colbert, *The Australian*, 28.01.04, p.12; Givhan & Gurvich, *The Australian*,

18.5.04, A3, p.4). Following its release, news stories documenting the film's box office success ("Super Size Me gobbles up at the box office" *The Age*, 08.06.04, p. 4) were accompanied by a wide range of reviews and opinion columns which discussed the film and its merits. Like *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Super Size Me* was able to transcend spaces within the newspaper. It was not confined solely to the arts and review sections; it became part of a broader media discussion about the obesity crisis and the boundaries between corporate responsibility and individual responsibility.

As was the case with *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the film resonated with a number of prominent news values. Common to many reviews of the film was a sense that *Super Size Me* possessed a persuasive power that would change consumer relationships with McDonald's. James Wigney's preview of *Super Size Me* began with the following:

> If Macca's and a movie sounds like a good night out to you, best grab your Big Mac before seeing *Super Size Me*.
>
> Chances are you won't want one after seeing the disturbingly amusing documentary by US filmmaker Morgan Spurlock. (*Sunday Herald Sun*, 30.05.04, p.E11)

The persuasive power attributed to *Super Size Me* within the Australian press was informed by an understanding of the impact the film had already had in America. A number of reports noted how the 'super size' option, which has never been available in Australia, was scrapped soon after *Super Size Me*'s release in America (see Murphy, *The Australian*, 24.06.04, p.20). From the early days of its coverage, the film had acquired the newsworthy symbolism of the little guy sticking it to the system. The domestic debate about obesity gave the film an air of timeliness and relevance, while its commercial success and Spurlock's visit to promote the film added to the range of newsworthy angles. Significantly, the film's focus on consumer issues corresponds with the news media's increasing interest in such matters. As Paul Manning argues,

"consumer issues are regarded as having stronger news values now, than in earlier decades" (2001: 162). The increasing salience of consumer-oriented issues is a crucial point to consider in relation to *Super Size Me*'s reception and this will be revisited later in this chapter.

In something of a backhanded nod to *Super Size Me*'s cultural presence in Australia, the federal Minister for Health and Aging at the time, Tony Abbott, referenced the film in his criticism of the Opposition Leader, Mark Latham (as reported in *The Australian*):

> Noting he was pictured last weekend eating a roll stuffed with hot chips, Mr Abbott said Mr Latham didn't seem to practise what he was preaching.
>
> "It seems the only book he read his kids that day was the form guide and he might have come across in the form guide, a nag called policy out of Super Size Me by Dr Man-Boobs," Mr Abbott said. (Maiden, *The Australian*, 18.06.04, p.6)

Notwithstanding Abbott's evident disdain for *Super Size Me*'s health message, the fact that it was deemed an appropriate enough reference to make in his attack on Latham offers some insight into the film's prominence within the Australian public consciousness at this time.

McDonald's powerful presence within Australian culture was noted in many of the press reports surrounding *Super Size Me*. In an article motivated by the film's Australian release, a columnist for the *Herald Sun* pondered the impact of McDonald's on our everyday lives: "Australian suburban children enter the world of McDonald's as soon as they hit the McBirthday party circuit at the age of five or six," wrote Chris Fotinopoulos:

> Within a decade or so many will be wearing their McDonald's uniform as they usher a new generation of McToddlers to the very spot their parents took them for their first meal... And so the McCycle continues (*Herald Sun*, 15.06.04, p.21).

An editorial in *The Age* began by noting that: "The US fast food giant has been asking Australians if they would like fries with that for more than 30 years. In the process it has changed the eating habits and diet of a generation" (27.06.04, p.12). The piece strives to present a voice of measured reason – no doubt consistent with the way *The Age* seeks to present itself as a newspaper. "Sometimes McDonald's deserves to be a target," the piece continues, "sometimes it does not." However, under the headline "Not just another Mac Attack" and a broader discussion about the marketing of McDonald's to children and schools, there is an overriding sense that the criticism levelled against McDonald's in *Super Size Me* is both justified and timely.

The Age editorial discussed above is emblematic of *Super Size Me*'s presence within the Australian press. While the editorial included other instances where McDonald's had been recently criticised, the piece relied on a sense of timeliness and currency which was linked to the *Super Size Me*'s strong box office showing and the discussion it generated throughout the newspaper. It encouraged scrutiny of fast-food corporations and their complicity in the obesity crisis. While it wasn't alone in this regard, its popularity did endow it with a unique capacity to act as a common reference point for this issue. This was also exemplified in stories which ostensibly had nothing whatsoever to do with the movie. Stories covering the controversial appointment of McDonald's Australia CEO Guy Russo to the board of Diabetes Australia prominently referenced *Super Size Me* (*Herald Sun*, 12.07.04, p.4; Teutsch, *The Age*, 11.07.04, p.3) as did a story concerning McDonald's financial success

(Brammall, *Herald Sun*, 09.06.04, p.37). Such coverage signifies the extent to which the film became part of the public discourse surrounding McDonald's which, in turn, had become a part of the public discourse on obesity.

This focus on corporate responsibility represents a significant shift in media representations of obesity. Previous studies (albeit in an American setting) have noted how obesity has typically been characterised as a problem caused by the unhealthy lifestyle choices of individuals (see Oliver & Lee 2005; Saguy & Riley 2005). According to Kim and Willis' analysis of ten years of American media reportage (1995-2004), "mentions of personal causes and solutions significantly outnumbered societal attributions of causes" (2007: 359). This focus on personal responsibility is often lamented by researchers. For example, Kelly Brownell describes American public discourse on obesity in the following terms:

> ... [It] has been mired in a dialogue that guarantees the status quo, namely that obesity is a matter of personal responsibility and that education is the solution. The first premise is wrong and the proposed solution is a dead end. There is a desperate need to broaden the discussion so that the central roles of economics, social conditions, and politics are addressed. (2005: 955-6)

The media's framing of obesity as a matter of personal responsibility has implications for how the problem is understood and whether or not it can be overcome. Brownell argues that:

> If obesity is a private issue, it stands to reason that little should be done beyond the minor efforts to persuade people to be responsible. There is little corporate and government responsibility – the only change needed is from the individual. (2005: 961)

In light of the above, we can begin to understand how *Super Size Me* can be regarded as something of a discursive intervention into public attitudes on obesity. Here, we had a prominent text, distributed globally and commented upon in a variety of contexts, which rebuked the prevailing sense that obesity was simply a consequence

of poor individual lifestyle choices. Significantly, it succeeded in expanding discussion on the issue in a way that obesity researchers had long been campaigning for. McDonald's had been dragged into the debate and, as their subsequent P.R. activity shows, they were reluctant and somewhat resentful of being there.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, McDonald's Australia mounted a public relations campaign against the claims made against it in the film. The campaign included television, cinema and print advertisements in which the name of the film was never mentioned; reference instead was made to "that movie." The advertisements summed up some of the key points of the film and then contrasted them with McDonald's Australia's own position (Sheehan 2005). While various opinions exist as to whether the public relations response by McDonald's was effective or not (see Heathcote 2004; Sheehan 2005), the mere existence of the campaign signifies the extent to which public discourse on obesity had shifted to include corporations like McDonald's within its frame.

McDonald's was able to find an important ally in this debate about its role in the obesity crisis – *The Australian* newspaper. On 30 June 2004, the newspaper carried two prominent articles, an editorial and an opinion column, which directly challenged the position of the film and those who supported it. Under the heading "Many ways to tackle a supersized problem," the editorial sought to first of all discredit the merits of the film before explaining why it has become so popular (*The Australian*, 30.06.04, p.14). Spurlock's health woes "could have been predicted by any ten-year-old," it argues before claiming that "Spurlock's movie plays to a vast reservoir of worldwide anti-McDonald's sentiment that is only partly based on nutrition: the rest is new class

snobbery and anti-Americanism." McDonald's, the editorial argues, "can only do its duty to its shareholders by selling more food. And it can only do that by pleasing... its customers." The column meanwhile, was published prominently on page 3 under the heading "How Ronald McDonald microsized me". The author claims, with tongue only slightly in cheek, that a week of McDonald's food (choosing the healthier Salads Plus options) and regular exercise enabled him to lose 2.5kgs. The piece concludes with the following:

> McDonald's in Australia varies in some important respects from the US picture presented by Spurlock. Nutritional material is abundantly available, and far from customers being prompted to ``supersize", the concept does not exist here.
>
> The total weekly cost of the Microsize Me diet was under $80, with no joining fee. This compares favourably with Jenny Craig and the low-carb diets offered by companies such as Nushape, which cost more than $130 a week.
>
> But here's the best news of all. There's a Ronald McDonald Weight Management Clinic right around the corner. (Salusinszky, *The Australian*, 30.06.04, p.3)

In one day's coverage then, *The Australian* newspaper had mounted what can only be seen as a defense of McDonald's, made all the more intriguing given that this came after McDonald's had launched its own counter-campaign. To the newspaper's credit, it did publish four letters the following day in which readers were able to share their distaste for both pieces. As one reader asked pointedly:

> CAN *The Australian* assure its readers that your editorial (30/6) on healthy eating at McDonald's was any more than media cash-for-comment propaganda? (Hart, 01.07.04, p.12)

Another wrote:

> In your advertorial on McDonald's, you state: "McDonald's can only do its duty to shareholders... by pleasing... its customers." Perhaps you should keep that in mind before you again print such dribble. (Jericho, 01.07.04, p.12)

This debate about McDonald's role in the obesity crisis thus offers an interesting insight into the ways in which the media becomes a forum for competing interests. Critical media scholarship has long maintained that those possessing greater financial resources are more likely to see their interests represented within the news media. As Paul Manning argues, "corporations and the communications agencies working on behalf of capital... enjoy significant advantages when they compete in the news arena against politically marginal sources" (Manning 2001: 162). One of the more subtle ways in which they might enjoy an advantage is through the shared interests of media companies and those of the corporations being criticised (Manning 2001: 166). In this context, the following interpretation of *Super Size Me* offered in the editorial referenced above is revealing:

> Spurlock is one of the new documentary makers in the Michael Moore tradition: give the viewers lots of interesting eye-fodder, and build to a peroration on the evils of capitalism. (*The Australian*, 30.06.04, p. 14)

Indeed, given their interpretation of the film as an assault on capitalism, it may not be all that surprising that the editorial of Rupert Murdoch's flagship Australian newspaper was less than beholden with *Super Size Me.*

Despite the many resources that corporations have when it comes to influencing the news agenda, it would be a mistake to assume that they get it all their own way. Indeed, as shown in the coverage afforded *Super Size Me* discussed earlier, the debate surrounding obesity and fast-food corporations in Australia could hardly be seen to be working in McDonald's' interests. The success of the film and the attention it received forced them into a defensive strategy which required them to enter into a public dialogue on the issue. An example of this was the page 1 story in *The Australian* on 25 June that ran with the headline "Maccas defends feeding children"

(Canning, 25.06.04, p. 1). The story quoted the Australian head of McDonald's Corporation, Charlie Bell who sought to refute claims that McDonald's targets children. The then Prime Minister of Australia, John Howard, also featured with his remark that, "the last time I checked it was not illegal for children to consume McDonald's". The piece referenced both *Super Size Me* and Australian political debates about advertising fast-food to children. While there can be no doubt here that McDonald's was able to access the news agenda and speak prominently on this issue, the mere existence of the debate indicates their lack of influence in either controlling or moderating the shape of debate.

The success of *Super Size Me*, and the debate that surrounded it, lends credence to the idea, expressed earlier, that it has become close to impossible for elites to exercise control over information flows within the media today (McNair 2006). The film was a key element among a range of factors which ensured that public debate about obesity in Australia included McDonald's, and there was very little they could do about it, apart from defend their practices.

Agendas and Triggers

The previous case study involved a film engaging with what was already *the* international news story of 2004, the war in Iraq. In this case study, however, we have a subject in obesity that was much more marginal within the Australian news media agenda. Not only did *Super Size Me* help boost the press' coverage of obesity, it also dragged a very unwilling player into the media spotlight – McDonald's. This, in turn, suggests that the magnetic influence of popular political documentaries can have an

agenda-setting function within the news media. The charts overleaf offer some illustration of the role that the film had in lifting the amount of obesity coverage within the Australian press.

According to agenda-setting theory, the media's power lies in its ability to set the public agenda – if an issue is reported it becomes validated as important and worthy of discussion. Michael Schudson argues that this is perhaps the most powerful, and perhaps the most overlooked, component of media power:

> When the media offer the public an item of news, they confer on it public legitimacy. They bring it into a common public forum where it can be known to and discussed by a general audience. They not only distribute the report of an event or announcement to a large group, they amplify it. This stimulates social interaction about "newsworthy" topics. (2003: 29)

The argument here is that popular political documentaries work to *amplify* the issues they address. They do this not only by being shown to a large number of people, but also – in much more diffuse and unpredictable ways – through the news media. While there remain a number of contested areas surrounding agenda-setting theory and research (see Manning 2001) there are some clear links that can be established between this field and the magnetic quality of popular political documentaries. In particular, we can focus on the notion of a "trigger event", discussed by Dearing and Rogers (1996) and Manning (2001), as a major concept for advancing our understanding of how films like *Super Size Me*, *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *An Inconvenient Truth* engage the news media and advance particular issues up the news agenda.

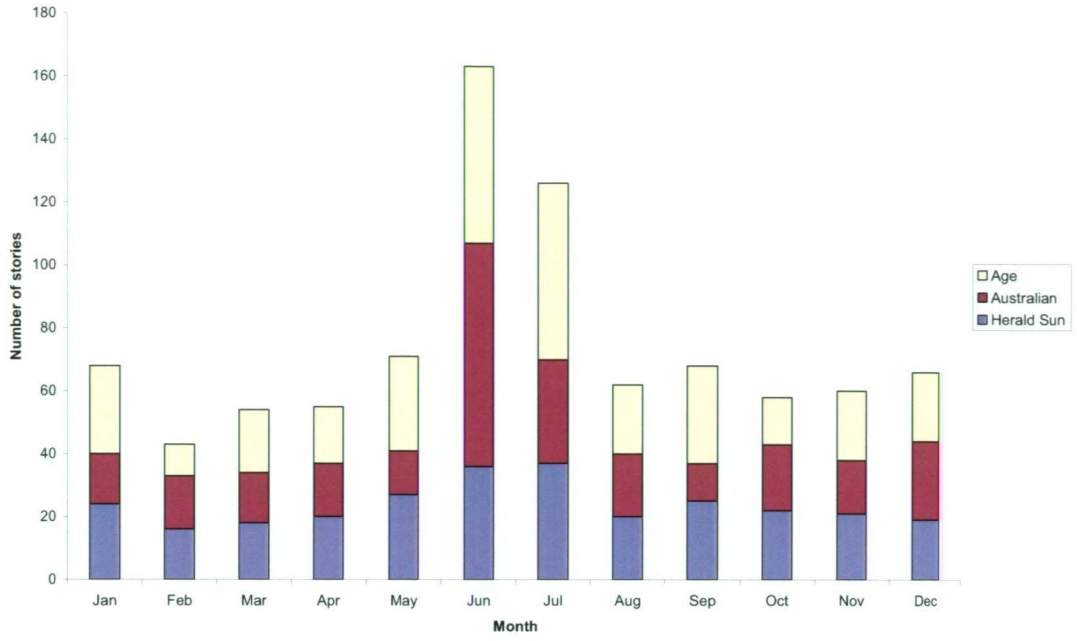

Figure 2. **Obesity coverage 2004**

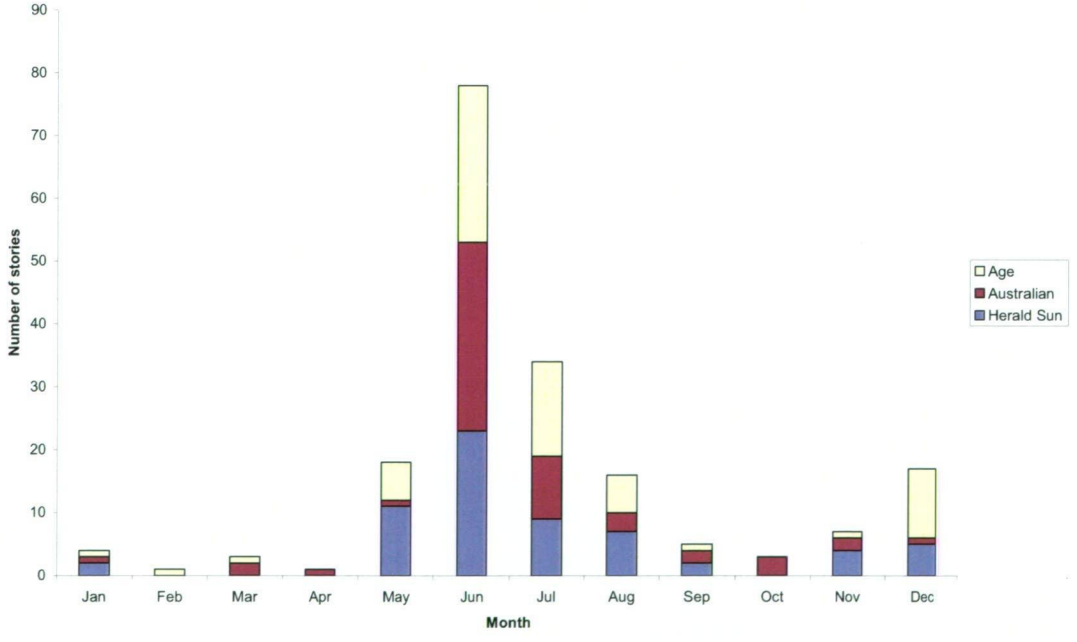

Figure 3. Super Size Me **coverage 2004**

According to Dearing and Rogers:

> ...a trigger event simplifies the nature of a complex issue into a form that the public can more easily understand. The public faces many issues at any point in time, far more than they can understand completely, given their limited time and attention. Thus, a trigger is a compelling force that helps an issue climb the agenda. (1996: 78)

Dearing and Rogers' notion of the trigger event is part of their conception of an agenda-setting process whereby, "the histories of how issues get on the national agenda provide a general picture of accident, fortuitous events, and chance happenings, along with rare instances of media advocacy" (1996: 69). Against this rather benign portrayal, Paul Manning argues, quite rightly, that trigger events "frequently involve the powerful or the prominent" (2001: 216) – a readily observable point whenever one scans the newspaper or watches the nightly news. As argued already, there are a complex range of factors involved in agenda-setting, which means that some groups in society are better equipped to influence the media agenda than others. Nevertheless, the concept of the trigger event signals the capacity of the media agenda to be influenced by a diverse range of actors communicating in a variety of ways.

A common example given in discussions of agenda-setting and trigger events is the 1984 BBC reports[28] on famine in Ethiopia (see Manning 2001; McNair 1998). These reports, which contained evocative and disturbing images of human suffering, played a decisive role in putting this issue on the public agenda and fuelling calls for intervention. In this instance it has been argued that the act of recording and broadcasting news of a humanitarian disaster propelled the issue into the public

[28] It is interesting to note that a British Film Institute exhibition: "Ten Documentaries that Shook the World" (2007-8) included Michael Buerck's original BBC report from Ethiopia. The films chosen were all deemed to have had "a demonstrable impact on the social, legislative or political climate in which they were made" (Cousins 2007: 25).

consciousness to such an extent that governments and other influential members of society felt compelled to act. While it is difficult to demonstrate precisely what impact such coverage has, we do know that the famine had existed prior to the BBC reports, and that it was only after these reports that the media and public interest shifted. As Brian McNair argues: "famine was present in the area before 1984 but had not been reported, so it did not exist for the Western publics, who take their cue on the importance of events from what they read, see and hear in the news media" (1998: 50).

The BBC coverage of the Ethiopian famine provides a particularly pertinent example for this thesis, as it highlights the potential for a specific media product, in this instance a television news feature (similar to a documentary), to influence both the media agenda and subsequent public thinking on an issue. When applying such ideas to an analysis of *Super Size Me*, it encourages an examination of how this film may have triggered media interest in obesity and the extent to which fast-food corporations are implicated in this issue. The commercial success of *Super Size Me*, and the amount of coverage it generated, demonstrates that there are means by which marginal and less-prominent voices can not only be heard, but actually set the news agenda. While we should not overlook the privileged position that powerful groups in society have when it comes to shaping the news agenda, we should also be aware of the novel and surprising ways that interventions are made. In a similar fashion to pressure group campaigns which court media attention, *Super Size Me* was able to influence the news agenda by virtue of its commercial success.

According to McDonald's Australia (2009), the company has, since 2004, introduced nutrition labelling on its food, has reduced the sugar content of its buns, has expanded its Salads Plus menu, has launched a "Never Stop Playing Campaign" in which Ronald McDonald encourages children to keep active and has added pasta options to its menu. While I am not suggesting that any of these responses can be directly linked to *Super Size Me*, it can nevertheless be argued that McDonald's Australia's change in direction can be linked to growing community concerns about health and obesity – concerns which were powerfully expressed in Spurlock's film. And, as has been argued above, *Super Size Me* did provoke a number of observable responses within the Australian press – from an increased coverage of obesity more generally, to critical examinations of fast-food corporations, to the PR response of McDonalds.

The Citizen Consumer

In the previous case study, it was shown how various assessments of *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s value as a form of political communication rested on certain assumptions, often implied, about the nature of citizenship. A vague but powerful vision of citizenship founded on rational and reasoned public discourse underpinned many of those claims that saw the film as dangerous propaganda, manipulating audiences and cheapening debate. Charges of propaganda were largely absent in the coverage of *Super Size Me* but there are, nevertheless, some intriguing connections between the film, its coverage and notions of citizenship. To begin with, it is worth returning to the point made previously about *Super Size Me*'s culture jamming quality.

Culture jamming, as we have already seen, is a form of political expression that seeks to confront the brands and symbols of corporate culture on their own turf. One of the ways they do this is to invite critical reflection on the part of the consumer. As David Cox argues, culture jammers "reject the notion of the citizen as merely consumer, and the idea of society as merely marketplace" (2001: 70). He describes their methods as "strategies for self-empowerment" (Cox 2001: 70). Towards the end of *Super Size Me*, Spurlock delivers what amounts to the film's call to action. It goes as follows:

> ...here is a crazy idea – why not do away with your super size options. Who needs 42 ounces of Coke, a half pound of fries and why not give me a choice besides french fries and french fries – that would be a great start...But why should the companies want to change? Their loyalty isn't to you. It's to the stockholders... They're a business, no matter what they say. And by selling you unhealthy food, they make millions and no company wants to stop doing that. If this ever-growing paradigm is going to shift, it's up to you.

This call to action certainly resides near the moderate end of the culture jamming spectrum. While Spurlock does suggest that the issue of obesity is a life or death one between individual consumers and corporations, there is little evidence that the film can be interpreted as a wholesale rejection of "the notion of the citizen as merely consumer, and the idea of society as merely marketplace." It is consumer action that is ultimately called for, not citizen or government action. And, as Margaret Scammell has noted, it is typical for "citizen" and "consumer" to be "considered opposite categories, the first outward-looking, embracing public interest, the second self-interested, inward-looking and private" (2003:125).

As a number of observers have noted, the last few decades have seen something of a "cross-pollination", or collision between the two "subjectivities" of the citizen and consumer within Western societies (Miller 2007: 32; Bennett 2003; Micheletti, Follesdal & Stolle 2006). This has occurred for a variety of reasons, including: the

fragmenting publics and the weakening of traditional civic institutions like churches, unions and major political parties; a weakening sense of collective identification with traditional social categories like class or the nation; a corresponding increase in the array of available social identities, and a "preoccupation with identity management and lifestyle choices...[;] a growing sense of individual risk... [and] a weakening of central authority in public life" (Bennett 2003: 140). These changes are, of course, an integral part of the broader political changes outlined earlier, and they have helped shift the coordination of public life away from "familiar citizen roles based on duties and obligations... [towards] lifestyle-oriented service and consumer activites" (Lance Bennett 2003: 140). Thus the ways in which citizenship is imagined and represented within contemporary society is seen to have changed, with the old hierarchy of reason, rationality and public-mindedness (Schudson 1998) being supplanted by a more individualised, self-interested and market-inspired orientation (Miller 2007). The opposition between the citizen and consumer expressed in the above paragraph has thus been eroded and, as Miller argues, the two positions "come together in an intermittently uncomfortable frottage... such that consumption and citizenship have become mutually constitutive" (2007: 30-1).

This colonisation of the 'old' citizenship with the model of the consumer is often interpreted negatively. Nicholas Garnham, for example, argues that the contemporary situation has transformed:

> public communication... into the politics of consumerism. Politicians appeal to potential voters not as rational human beings concerned for the public good, but in the mode of advertising, of creatures of passing and largely irrational appetite, whose self-interest they must purchase. (1990: 111)

Similar claims inform Lewis, Inthorn and Wahl-Jorgensen's (2005) critique of contemporary media which, they argue, address us as consumers far more frequently and imaginatively, than they do as citizens.

Without discounting such concerns, it is worth turning to other perspectives on the consumer which are less pessimistic. As Corner and Pels have noted, some commentators have interpreted the rise of so-called consumer-consciousness as signifying:

> an end to deference and a clearer sense of quality and choice. It has worked against producer controls and has thus exerted what can finally be seen as an empowering, democratising effect upon those social areas in which it has become prominent. (2003:5)

Meanwhile, as Micheletti, Follesdal and Stolle (2006) note, the collision between market-values embodied in the consumer, and democratic values embedded in the citizen, is seen by some as creating a two-way flow whereby, "the struggle between consumerism and citizenship, between market values of competition and political values of solidarity, politicizes the market and privatizes and commercializes politics" (2006: xiii, citing Klein 2000). We can find plentiful evidence of this in the numerous political campaigns waged against the corporate world, from the fair trade movement and consumer boycotts, through to the dramatic and often violent protests that have hounded the World Trade Organisation in recent years (Klein 2000; Micheleti 2006).

This 'politicisation' of the market has heralded the rise of what Margaret Scammell calls the 'citizen consumer', whereby "consumers are empowered in relation to producers, and their shopping habits are citizen-like to the extent that the goal of satisfaction of personal wants is tempered with wider social awareness, with a concern for impact on the public, increasingly global realm" (2003: 119). Such ideas can

productively inform our understanding of *Super Size Me*'s politics. The text speaks to us in the voice of the citizen consumer, wedding political change to a change of consumption habits. Spurlock – in spite of the privileged position he occupies as the producer and director of the film – presents himself as an ordinary guy. His experiment, for example, is based on a desire to replicate the lifestyle of ordinary, average Americans. His call to action at the end of the movie is a summons for the citizen consumer to recognise his/her power in relation to producers. It is not a call for the overthrow of the 'corporate beast' which we might expect from the radical traditions of culture jamming, but it is an intervention into public discourses of obesity, McDonald's and consumer culture more generally. Not only does it criticise the practices of fast-food corporations, it reminds its viewers that they do have a power with which they can create change.

Considering *Super Size Me* in this context also prompts a re-consideration of its stylistic approach. The rise of consumer-oriented discourse within society corresponds with the ascendancy of the brand as a key cultural resource which links particular products to particular forms of identity, lifestyle and community (Arviddson 2006). Given this ascendancy, communication strategies which target these particular brands and link them to particular political messages are increasingly likely to win both media and public attention (Bennett 2003: 147). The Nike sweatshop example given earlier in this chapter is just one example here, and we can see a similar dynamic at work with *Super Size Me*. By attaching itself to McDonald's ubiquitous cultural presence, the film was able to register in a particularly evocative *and* provocative manner across a range of cultural contexts – from the Australian cinema-going public, to the Australian press, and those at the helm of McDonald's Australia.

This mode of communicating is not unique to *Super Size Me*; rather, it should inform our thinking about how popular political documentaries operate more generally. Presented through the channels of mainstream entertainment, these texts speak in ways that move the documentary closer to the individualised and consumer-oriented modes of citizenship discussed above. Indeed, they raise interesting questions about the style of political engagement embodied in people choosing to purchase tickets to watch these films. As has been demonstrated across the two case studies thus far, there is a tendency for the news media to interpret high attendances as an indicator of the political support for the messages contained within the films. This point will be developed further in the following chapter.

CONCLUSION

This case study has shown how the politics of *Super Size Me* accords with the political climate in which it was produced. The film speaks to a hybrid citizen-consumer identity that seeks to colour the practice of fast-food production and consumption in a political light. In this way it acts as a kind of cinematic culture jam, resonating with broader modes of political protest and activism directed against the corporate world. It is up to you the customer, Spurlock argues, to demand better of corporations like McDonald's. This individualised form of political address has become increasingly common across many forms of political communication. It mirrors the emphasis on personality and individual stories that are central to the popular political documentary and political communication more generally. In focusing its critique squarely on McDonald's, *Super Size Me* exploits the visibility of the brand and attaches a new set

of meanings. McDonald's is vomiting out a car window. McDonald's is Spurlock's liver turning to "pate." McDonald's, and corporations like it, are key causes of the obesity crisis.

This particular blend of entertainment and political critique lent *Super Size Me* a magnetic quality that pulled obesity and the question of corporate responsibility up the news media agenda. Although the forces shaping the news agenda are complex and difficult to measure, we can observe the film working as a 'trigger event' which generating further media interest in obesity and the complicity of fast-food. Although the super size option had never been available in Australian McDonald's restaurants, and although the film maintains a distinct American focus, the film engaged Australian audiences who watched the film in record numbers. It engaged Australian journalists and pundits too, and they referenced the film regularly in their coverage of obesity and the accompanying political debate. McDonald's, predictably, struck back and the coverage thus presents an archive of struggle in which different perspectives came to the fore over obesity and its causes. The question posed by Spurlock at the very beginning of the film – *Where does personal responsibility end and corporate responsibility begin?* – became a key point of debate. This flow of meaning from the film out into the news media represents another case of magnetic media in action.

CHAPTER 6

AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH:

CONVERGENCE, CRITICAL MOMENTS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

> *"Well, I don't take policy advice from films."*
>
> The then Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, in response to a question over whether he had seen *An Inconvenient Truth* (*The Australian*, 11.09.06, p.9).

As the final case study, this chapter performs dual roles. The first is to provide a detailed analysis of how *An Inconvenient Truth* contributed to public knowledge - that shared realm of information, ideas, beliefs and ways of understanding. Secondly, this chapter will bring out some of the more general features of popular political documentaries which apply to all three films. Therefore, aspects of the analyses that follow will speak back to topics covered in the previous chapters. In particular, issues relating to the popular and political aspects of *An Inconvenient Truth*, the way it was represented in the Australian press and the ways in which the cluster of meanings surrounding the film and the coverage spoke to matters of citizenship and climate change politics will be folded back onto more general observations about the contribution that popular political documentaries make to public knowledge. Having said that, the unique features of *An Inconvenient Truth*'s magnetism will also be explored, including its capacity to attract a diverse range of political and corporate support, its invocation of a particularly global sense of citizenship and the way it

functioned as a "critical discourse moment" (Gamson 1992; Carvalho 2005) within the Australian press' coverage of climate change politics.

SYNOPSIS

An Inconvenient Truth was directed by Davis Guggenheim and was first released in January 2006. It was distributed by Paramount Classics and opened in Australian cinemas on 14 September 2006. In 2007, it won the Academy Award for Best Documentary.

The film documents the efforts of the former US Vice-President Al Gore to alert the world to the impending catastrophe of unchecked climate change. Much of the footage is drawn from presentations that Gore has given on the subject, where he explains the science and the consequences of global warming. The presentation involves graphs, anecdotes, images and video footage deployed as evidence of both the scientific consensus surrounding climate change and the devastation it will cause. The footage of Gore presenting his 'slideshow' is interspersed with sequences detailing his own personal and political journey. The film ends with Gore urging immediate action on climate change, detailing some of the ways in which the audience can get involved.

Convergence

An Inconvenient Truth is a film based on a lecture. It is available on DVD and in book form, with additional material and updates available on its own website. As noted in the introduction, the film and its star featured across a range of media, from the covers of popular magazine through to late-night variety television shows. The film can be downloaded, legally or illegally, while trailers, excerpts and spoofs are readily available on *YouTube* and other video sharing sites. The song made to accompany the film, "I need to wake up," performed by Melissa Etheridge, won the Academy Award for Best Original Song and it too is readily available on the internet as well as being released on Etheridge's own greatest hits album. Aside from that piece of music, the film's original soundtrack was released in September 2006 and there is an Italian opera reportedly in the works which is based on the film and is due to open in 2011 (Thomson 2008). As of 10 December 2009, a Facebook group dedicated to *An Inconvenient Truth* had 13,227 members. As these examples show, *An Inconvenient Truth* has been able to establish a presence across a diverse range of media.

Throughout this thesis, there has been a focus on the ways in which the meanings of popular political documentaries circulate beyond the films themselves. While the focus has primarily been on how this occurs within the Australian press, we should not lose sight of the fact that these films engage a broad range of media in a variety of different ways. These relationships between different forms of media has been theorised by Henry Jenkins as a key component of "convergence culture" whereby

content flows across different media platforms, different media industries cooperate and audiences are "migratory" in the sense that they will "go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (Jenkins 2006: 2). One of the unique features of popular political documentaries, as distinct from other documentaries, is the extent to which they are implicated within this convergence culture that Jenkins describes. *Fahrenheit 9/11* had its own website and book, as did *Super Size Me*. They were advertised and promoted in mainstream cinemas and DVD outlets and, as has been shown across the two case studies covered thus far, they entered into a complex relationship with the news media.

This idea of convergence culture provides an interesting avenue for considering the connections that popular political documentaries establish with other media forms. As noted in Chapter One, convergence "is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process" (Jenkins 2006: 18). In his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006), Jenkins looks at how convergence has reconfigured relationships between media producers and media consumers. From the corporate-producer perspective, he talks of the opportunities convergence offers to extend brands, products or franchises across different media, reaching larger audiences, creating new possibilities for consumer engagement with their product and, ultimately, expanding profits. At the same time, however, convergence also signals a fragmentation of audiences and a loosening of controls surrounding the content of media, which can, in turn, represent a challenge to corporate or producer power (2006: 19-20).

For media consumers, convergence culture represents the opportunity to participate in the media – whether it be voting for their favourite contestant on *Australian Idol* or, as Jenkins describes, fan cultures which communicate publicly about future plot developments of their favourite franchises, modify game software to suit their own individual tastes and desires, or develop their own narratives which extend out from and possibly transform the media they consume (2006: 19-22). Returning to popular political documentaries, we can see the dynamics of convergence at work in the various platforms in which these texts are made and sold as commodities (film, DVD, book, soundtrack etc.) and also in the ways in which they are appropriated to suit the needs of consumers – whether in their availability on peer-to-peer file sharing networks, discussion surrounding them in online forums, their use in 'house parties' or political meetings, or their deployment as educational tools, inside and outside the classroom.

One particular example of convergence worth discussing in relation to *An Inconvenient Truth* is the ways in which it was used and appropriated for political and/or public relations purposes by various groups from the corporate and non-government sector. Here are just a few examples: the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) is an environmental lobby group active in Australian since the 1960s. The organisation partnered with Al Gore's "The Climate Project" to promote awareness and pressure for action on climate change within Australia. This involved promoting the film heavily on its release, organising screenings and joint promotion while also training local presenters to deliver a similar presentation to the one offered by Gore within the film. Here we find an explicit link between the grass-roots political networks of town hall forums or community meetings and the commercial networks

in which the film itself was distributed. According to the ACF, this partnership with *An Inconvenient Truth* reaped a number of benefits, including increased exposure and credibility through their public affiliation with the film, free cinema advertising and the opportunity to add a more local perspective to the film's message on climate change (cited in *Documentary Australia*, n.d.). Other environmental groups like Greenpeace and the WWF promoted the film prominently and offered free screenings.[29] Both organisations carried links to the film's website on their own sites, with WWF Australia providing their own fact sheet titled "Australia's Inconvenient Truth."

Meanwhile, an Australian tourism company called Intrepid Travel offered Australian residents the opportunity to see the film for free by offering them the opportunity to send their ticket stubs to their offices to secure a refund (I.T., n.d.). "We want you to see this film," was the company's justification for this offer, "this film may change your life. Hopefully it will change [the] planet we live on too" (I.T., n.d.). According to a company report, they refunded $AU38,766 in ticket costs (I.T., n.d.). In Tasmania, a local carpenter organised 10 free community screenings at a local cinema, while councils and universities across the country adopted similar initiatives (Grube 2007, UWA 2007, BCC 2007).

As seen in the above examples, the politics of *An Inconvenient Truth* made it an attractive public relations tool for a diverse range of constituents. Businesses looking to promote an image of environmental responsibility sought alliances with the film,

[29] http://www.wwf.org.au/articles/an-inconvenient-truth/; http://www.greenpeace.org/australia/news-and-events/events/previous/2006/inconvenient-truth

environmental groups recognised the value of tying their messages to the film, as did various other community leaders and institutions. These alliances were communicated to the public through advertising and promotional materials, often using the internet. Similar dynamics were evident in the release of *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *Super Size Me*. In America, the Move On organisation, an alliance of progressively-minded political interest groups organised a series of house parties dubbed "grass roots mobilization" to coincide with *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s release (Smith 2004). On 22 April 2006, *The Guardian* newspaper in England gave away free copies of *Super Size Me* with every issue purchased[30]. In both instances, we can see unique relationships generated through an awareness of both the popularity and the politics of these films, and the political and public relations opportunities they represent.

The convergence represented here involves the coming together of not only media technologies and media genres but also a convergence of various political interests who have recognised the unique power that popular political documentaries possess. As has been argued throughout this thesis, the power of these films can be best understood as a particular type of magnetism which attracts other forms of media and leads to a heightened prominence and visibility. As seen above, this magnetism also extends to a range of interest groups who share their political vision.

Of course, as should be well established by now, there is no guarantee that all the attention lavished on these films will be complementary. The flipside to their visibility is a heightened vulnerability to scrutiny and criticism. Just as these films can provide

[30]http://www.nmauk.co.uk/nma/do/live/haveYouSeen;jsessionid=C135D590BE900E283E55A74707EA1523?haveYouSeenModel=6217

common meeting points for those sympathetic to their politics, so too can they become focal points for those hostile to the political agendas they represent. Alongside voices heard in the mainstream media, we can find opposition to *An Inconvenient Truth* and its politics in a broad array of websites and blogs that seek to undermine or oppose the claims made in the film and about climate change more broadly.[31] Within a convergent media environment, press articles, blogs, videos and parodies can, and do, circulate rapidly among like-minded souls on either side of the climate change debate.

In this regard we can witness the fragmentary nature of convergence, where a blog like 'Skeptics Global Warming' links to other blogs such as "Global Warming Hoax", "Gore Lied" and "A Dog Named Kyoto".[32] Their disdain for *An Inconvenient Truth* and its arguments about climate change belong to a broad and loose online network of shared views about climate change. Likewise, those advocating for action on climate change established similar networks of links, forums and common discussion points.

These different online networks of information and opinion point to some major areas of debate about the internet's social role. Optimistic accounts of the rise of the internet and the 'blogosphere' point to increasing diversity of information available online which, it is argued, "encourages users to cross reference and access competing positions on current debate" (McNair 2006: 151). Without discounting such views, we should also be mindful of the internet's potential to seemingly encourage people to

[31] See http://climaterealists.com/index.php, http://ihatealgore.com/, http://climatechangeskeptic.blogspot.com/, , http://www.skepticsglobalwarming.com/, http://www.climatechangefraud.com/,

[32] http://www.skepticsglobalwarming.com/?page_id=5153

source information and perspectives that already correspond with their own particular world views. As Cass Sunstein (2008) has argued:

> We live increasingly in an era of enclaves and niches — much of them voluntary — with much of the content in each produced by those who think they know, and often actually do know, what we're likely to like.

The argument here is that convergent culture can potentially produce greater polarisation, rather than a diversity of shared views (see Jenkins 2006). In the above examples we can witness both dynamics at work as a diverse range of information and perspectives becomes available, while potentially being filtered and channelled through like-minded networks.

The implication of popular political documentaries within convergence culture raises a number of different issues. As seen above, convergence facilities the journey of these texts across multiple platforms and spaces, increasing their visibility and their potential for profit. It also opens up spaces for greater consumer participation – supporters and opponents of these films were able to communicate their views publicly, and access the views of others. While the internet is a key player here, we need to be mindful of separating this emerging form of media from the broader media environment (Dahlgren 2009: 160). Convergence is about the connections between media and therefore the websites and blogs that circulate around these films have a relevance that extends beyond the mere site of their production or consumption.

A pertinent example illustrating the above points can be found by returning to a particular set of exchanges that occurred at the time of *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s Australian release. The film drew a particularly heated attack from *Herald Sun* columnist

Andrew Bolt's who, in mounting his case against the film drew (with acknowledgement) from the webpage "Fifty-nine deceits in Fahrenheit 9/11"[33] (Bolt, 21.07.04, p. 19). A subsequent letter to the editor admonished Bolt for drawing "almost exclusively" from a website authored by "a full on gun lobby supporter... so it is no wonder he is anti-Moore" (Stewart, *Herald Sun*, 23.07.04, p. 16). We can see here how the logic of convergence has facilitated an exchange in which an array of related media is drawn upon to inform opposing points of view. Once again we are reminded that popular political documentaries do not operate in a vacuum – the meanings and debates attached to them are influenced and shaped by a diverse and inter-connected media landscape, alongside the broader cultural influences they encounter.

The first case study examined how Michael Moore's celebrity, established and performed across a range of media, impacted upon the production and reception of *Fahrenheit 9/11*. The second case study looked at the links between *Super Size Me* and other forms of 'personalised' media, while also exploring its hijacking of the McDonald's brand. The idea of convergence culture provides a compelling frame for considering these trends alongside those discussed above in relation to *An Inconvenient Truth*. Popular political documentaries are very much products of their time, gaining visibility, profitability, support and resistance across a variety of communicative spaces.

[33] http://davekopel.com/Terror/Fiftysix-Deceits-in-Fahrenheit-911.htm

Performance

Aside from an animated sequence and a few news clips, there is only one voice heard in *An Inconvenient Truth* – Al Gore's. He *inhabits* the film, whether through his visible on-screen presence or his off-screen narration. While he is not the director of the movie, the film effectively belongs to him, with the director Davis Guggenheim (2006) admitting that his own role was really "just sort of in service of trying to get that thing [Gore's lecture] visible and shown." Appearing on stage within the film, Gore's performance is one of authority, candour and the odd sprinkling of humour. From the opening scenes where he introduces himself by saying "I used to be the next President of the United States of America," it is clear that Gore's performance leans heavily on his political status as former vice-president of the United States. As has been argued in previous chapters, this performative element is an essential component of popular political documentaries. We have seen Moore engage with politics via a performance that emphasises his working class roots, his "outsider" status and his lack of deference to authority. We have seen Spurlock perform a sacrificial role that relies on the authority of his own lived experience, verified by medicine and science, to challenge corporate power. And now, we need to examine Gore who, quite clearly, is working within very different parameters.

For much of his career in politics, Gore's 'performance' as a politician has received unfavourable reviews. For example, a 1999 profile of Gore describes him as:

> the man consistently derided as America's most boring public servant... The public has long known Gore as the stoic and wooden butt of late-night television gab – a man who has occasionally busted out with some good self-deprecating jokes, but otherwise has succeeded in lulling the country to sleep over the better part of the last decade. (Kurtzman 1999)

In the race for the White House in 2000, Gore's narrow and controversial loss to George W. Bush was blamed, in part, on his inability to connect with voters on a personal level and a perception that he was a "timid, pedantic bore" (McNair 2003: 138). Not surprisingly then, there was considerable scepticism that greeted the idea of a film based on a lecture given by a man with such a reputation. In his commentary accompanying the Australian DVD release of *An Inconvenient Truth*, the director Davis Guggenheim recounts his early pessimism about the film's prospects:

> You have a guy on stage talking about charts and graphs and pictures of continents and even though its compelling in person... to actually make that into a movie was a huge leap of what you think audiences will accept... How do you take a lecture, essentially, and make it interesting? (2006a)

Al Gore himself has commented on the film's improbable origins. "A global warming slideshow by Al Gore? What part of that doesn't scream box office gold" (qtd in Bruce, *Herald Sun* 16.09.06, p. W06).

Clearly then, to understand how *AIT* functioned as a popular political documentary, we need to pay close attention to the performance of Al Gore within the film. Gore's longstanding political prominence, and his early on-screen comments cited above, ensure that audiences are encouraged to view Gore as a political figure. Such a reading is buttressed with archived campaign shots of Gore the politician campaigning in the Senate for action on climate change, or footage drawn from his loss to Bush in 2000. At various points throughout the movie, Gore is shown in airports and cars, travelling the world to deliver his global warming lecture. He meets foreign dignitaries, business people and students. He is at ease with his audience, performing the role of the statesman. His lecture, meanwhile, invokes visions of classical democracy in which Gore stands alone before the public to present his case. As one

review put it: "It is a masterful example of forceful political rhetoric, like Cicero in the Forum with a PowerPoint projector" (Glover, *The Australian*, 16.11.07, p. 10).

Gore's centrality to the film, and his overt politics, have encouraged a number of valuable analyses of the film's rhetoric (see Frentz & Rosteck 2009; Johnson 2009). Frentz and Rosteck, for example, argue that the film encompasses a range of different rhetorical strategies which, in turn, allow a range of different interpretations of the film. In particular, they link the personal focus on Gore to the Aristotelian concept of *ethos* – whereby the character of the person making a particular argument is foregrounded as a particularly effective means of persuasion (2009: 3). This is a concept that has relevance to all three popular political documentaries studied and it links with earlier discussions about the performance of "political personhood" (Corner 2003). Popular political documentaries rely, in large part, on the appeal (or ethos) of the central protagonist. As noted already, this mirrors broader developments within political communication which have seen the politics of personality become a defining feature (Street 2001).

Gore's centrality to *AIT* leads Laura Johnson to argue that the film is ultimately "a documentary balancing act... nominally 'about' global warming while also clearly 'about' Al Gore, citizen-hero-(former?) politician" (2009: 30). The film features a number of small vignettes, the "little film" as Davis Guggenheim calls it, which, for the most part, involves recollections from Gore about his own political engagement with climate change. In the film's opening few shots, images of Gore's political past precede his hushed lament: "I've been trying to tell this story for a long time and I feel as if I've failed to get the message across." The quiet, seemingly unscripted delivery

suggests an intimacy that contrasts with Gore's commanding on-stage oratory. If Gore on-stage invokes the classical "public man" of political philosophy, then the small vignettes function, in part, to highlight the private and the personal side of Gore's politics. Such a division points to the possibility of various points of engagement for the audience. Davis Guggenheim explained the purpose of this approach by acknowledging that "for people to invest in the movie, they'd have to invest in him [Gore]".

This focus on the personal side of Gore's politics includes his re-telling of the turning point in his political career, which was triggered by the personal trauma of nearly losing his son to a car accident.

> The possibility of losing what was most precious to me – I gained an ability that maybe I didn't have before, but when I felt it, I felt that we could really lose it... that what we take for granted might not be there for our children.

Photos of the hospital and Gore waiting at his son's bedside accompany the narrative. Later in the film he returns to the family farm in Carthage, Tennesee. Changes in film stock give the sequence a home video aesthetic and a touch of nostalgia. Gore recalls his sister's untimely death from lung cancer after a lifetime of smoking and the painful link her death had to their family's tobacco farm.

> The idea that we had been part of that economic pattern that produced the cigarettes that produced the cancer, it was so... it was so painful on so many levels. My father – he had grown tobacco all his life – he stopped. Whatever explanation had seemed to make sense in the past just didn't cut it anymore.

The parallels here between the personal cost the Gore family paid for following a particular cultural and "economic pattern" and the warnings the film gives about the price of climate change and the "patterns" that cause it are explicit.

According to Frentz and Rosteck, the "little film" within *An Inconvenient Truth* provides the film with a two-dimensional mythic narrative, in which the familiar conventions of "archetypal heroism" overlay Gore's own personal story, which provides "an experiential template based in one exemplary life story" (2009: 5). The story of Gore's own personal journey is understood here as providing the audience with an insight into how an individual can come to understand climate change and then choose to combat it. Given that climate change politics proposes fundamental changes to the way people live, this tale of an individual lifestyle change is a core element of the film's political message.

Another aspect of Al Gore's performance which needs to be considered is the question of how much of his own political history is invested in his on-screen persona. Following the controversy surrounding the 2000 US election, a controversy which captured the world's attention, Al Gore continues to occupy a central role as the infamous loser in the campaign that saw George W. Bush assume the presidency. Released six years into the Bush presidency, a time in which 9/11, the wars on terror, Iraq and Afghanistan had already altered global politics beyond measure, *An Inconvenient Truth* re-introduced the world to the man who came tantalisingly close to winning the presidency. In a time of war, uncertainty, and blossoming anti-American sentiments, Gore seemingly embodied a thwarted promise that the tribulations of recent history might have been averted had a different man been elected president. As one columnist, in a piece titled, "The wrong man is President: Even climate is paying the price," wrote:

> ... you watch and you curse the single vote on the US Supreme Court that denied this man – passionate, well informed and right – the presidency of the United States in favour of George Bush... the world has been living with the consequences ever since. (Freedland, *The* Age, 18.09.06, p. 15)

Al Gore's status as the thwarted politician comprises an important though difficult to define aspect of his performance in *AIT*. Though references to the 2000 election are brief, *AIT* nevertheless encourages a perception of Gore as a man who has somehow been wronged. He talks of the hurt he suffered as a result of his defeat and, of his frustration more broadly, about not being able to do more as a politician to raise awareness and action to combat climate change. According to Laura Johnson (2009), the nature of Gore's political failures are a crucial ingredient of his on-screen persona. On the one-hand he is presented as a prestigious and successful politician who now travels the world in a statesman-like manner advising citizens on the perils of climate change. Yet, at the same time, he is still Al Gore – *the guy who lost the 2000 election.* According to Johnson, "the film position's Gore's political experiences as evidence of gaps in the progressive mythos and flaws that allow the political process to falter" (2009: 37). Thus, while still being able to draw on the authority of the politician, Gore can also draw on the authority of "the outsider", which he must do in order to legitimately criticise political inaction on climate change. If we, as an audience, are dismayed by our governments' inaction on climate change, then Gore is similarly dismayed because, according to the film, he has been there, on the inside trying to create change. Gore's political personhood in *AIT* is thus constructed around an authority derived from the full spectrum of his personal and political experiences – his successes as well as his failures.

Overall, the film's personal focus on Al Gore serves a number of purposes. He provides a point of identification within the complex array of scientific data, statistics and forecasts. As argued by Frentz and Rosteck (2009), the focus on Gore's own personal history provides a template of individual agency in the face of climate

change. It also brings the film into an alignment with broader media trends such as the focus on celebrity and the personal 'confessional' genres discussed in previous chapters. It is a means through which the complex science of climate change is popularised.

Of course, as seen in the previous case studies, such an approach has its pitfalls. Boykoff and Goodman (2009) have analysed the various ways in which celebrities participate in public discourses of climate change. Within their account of the "promises and perils" of celebrity involvement in climate change politics, they argue that personalised representations of climate change politics, such as the one provided in *An Inconvenient Truth*, can work to embed an individualistic focus that potentially deflects attention and energy away from the large-scale structural changes that the politics of climate change demand (2009: 395). The presentation of celebrity "heroes", they argue:

> effectively cements individualization and the neoliberal project while purporting and aiming to do otherwise... Consequently, 'green' consumer behaviors—such as recycling and the purchase of carbon 'offsets'—might serve as a misguided yet palliative balm to soothe our collective consciousness, embedded still in largely capitalist and modernist frameworks. (2009: 404)

The argument here is that people are led to believe that 'taking action' on climate change merely involves simple lifestyle changes, rather than a more widespread and fundamental series of societal reforms.

Personalising the issue also risks making the messenger, not the message, the focus of debate. In discussing what he dubs the "celebritisation" of politicians, Graeme Turner argues that: "the danger for a politician who visibly 'celebritises' their self-representation is that they won't be taken seriously..." (2004: 134). In the earlier case

studies, we saw how much of the coverage surrounding *Fahrenheit 9/11* revolved around Moore and his methods, which may have diverted attention away from some of the issues his film sought to address. Likewise, some reviewers interpreted *Super Size Me* as a shameless vehicle for self-promotion on the part of Spurlock. While the Australian press coverage of *An Inconvenient Truth* will be dealt with later in the chapter, the following paragraphs will briefly explore how they interpreted Al Gore's performance within the film.

Broadly speaking, the Australian press found plenty to praise in Gore's performance. In the words of one impressed reviewer: "Gore is the Sherpa guiding million's to the topic's summit, his PowerPoint presentation providing the loftiest, most panoramic view" and, "there's something reassuringly middle class about the former US vice-president... In neither Gore's film nor his public appearances does he rave or rant. His is the polished urbanity of the professional politician seeking consensus" (Adams, *The* Australian, 19.09.07, p. 14).

Looking further, it is clear that *AIT* served to dramatically change Gore's public image. As one writer in *The Age* observed, "It should be the perfect yawn. A souped-up lecture given by a middle-aged, thwarted politician who was best known for being dull and wooden. Yet the film somehow gets in your gut," (Freedland, *The Age*, 18.09.06, p. 15). Another article marvelled at the transformation of this "uninspiring technocrat" to someone who had "earned cult status by reinventing himself as a green guru" (Gettler, *The Age*, 18.11.06, p. 1 INSIGHT). The *Herald Sun* meanwhile, commented on Gore's "rock star" status, noting how he has suddenly become a "hip celebrity" (Bruce, 16.09.06, p. W06). "Al Gore is a kind of nerdy superman" began

one piece in *The Australian.* (Warren, 02.09.06, p. 17). Perhaps a writer for *Entertainment Weekly* expressed it best when he observed: "Miraculously, over the past few months, *An Inconvenient Truth* has accomplished something many people once thought inconceivable: It's made Al Gore cool" (Svetky 2006).

Such coverage emphasises the extent to which *An Inconvenient Truth* marks a transformation in the political career of Al Gore from dour politician to celebrity activist. The transformation does not concern Al Gore himself, but rather, the way he was represented across a diverse range of media. This was undoubtedly encouraged by the film and the promotion surrounding it; however, it was ultimately through other media, like those listed above, that such a shift occurred. This transformative element of *An Inconvenient Truth* represents another dimension of the film's magnetism which, in attracting other media, served to create a new set of meanings surrounding the public figure of Al Gore. It was these inter-texts that established a public re-presentation of Gore, a portrayal that arguably allowed him to speak to a much broader and diverse audience than he ever did in his formal political career. In circumstances somewhat opposed to the previous two case studies, the star of this show is not seeking to translate celebrity appeal into political weight, but rather, there is an attempt to transfer Gore's political weight into something more popularly accessible. He talks about his family, his youth and his friends. He cracks jokes. He uses cartoons to convey his message. Instead of reaching out to the world of formal politics, he is trying to reach out to the world of popular culture.

In much the same way that Moore and Spurlock were criticised for being shallow, or self-centred, in their approach, there were voices within the Australian press which

criticised *An Inconvenient Truth*'s Gore-centred approach. "It's all a bit rich being hectored by celebrity hypocrites" was the headline for one particular piece (Henderson, *The Australian*, 13.09.06, p. 14). Meanwhile, Ian Macfarlane, who was the Australian Federal Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources at the time, was quoted a number of times dismissing the film as "just entertainment" (Topsfield, *The Age*, 16.09.06, p. 9; *The Australian*, 26.01.09, p. 4). As will be discussed later, some of the claims made in the film were contentious, with Gore consequently being branded by some as an alarmist, extremist or exaggerator (*Herald Sun*, 12.09.06, p. 2; *The Australian*, 06.02.07, p. 13; Bolt, *Herald Sun*, 02.03.06, p. 21). Underlying both these negative and positive assessments of Gore's performance in *An Inconvenient Truth* was conflicting perspectives on climate change which will be addressed further in a later section of this chapter.

While the two previous case studies provide compelling examples of the ways in which political discourse now incorporates a diverse range of actors speaking in myriad ways, the example of *An Inconvenient Truth* carries a special significance. Although Gore does not completely shed his 'politician' persona in *An Inconvenient Truth*, he does step outside it. "This is not a political issue," he argues, but a moral one. His reflections on his career in politics, as a politician, remain just that, reflections, fixed in a grainy past. While critical of the current administration, he does not speak as a Democrat. Instead, we are presented with a portrayal of a man whose capacity to effect change within the official world of politics was limited, despite once being the second in command of the most powerful nation on Earth. The star role in a popular political documentary thus emerges as an effective form of 'politics by other means,' so effective in fact, that one can reasonably assume that Gore has achieved

more on the issue of climate change in his role as a celebrity climate change activist than he ever did, or was likely to do, as a politician.

According to Brian McNair, "the political communicator is a performer, and will be judged by the audience, at least partly, on the quality of their performance" (2003: 38). Across the three case studies covered, we have seen how performance has been a central component of each film's politics. Considered alongside the increasing circulation of celebrity and the intermingling of politics and popular culture, it is perhaps not surprising that the political messages of these films are presented in such a fashion. In each film a number of different resources were deployed in the service of performances that were personalised and impassioned. These resources include the familiarity of celebrity; the whispered revelation and the off-guard remark; the pleasures of humour and an overall willingness to address audiences in popular styles and vernaculars. Such strategies reflect a political environment that accommodates or at least encourages all these modes of expression. It is at this point that the analysis of the news coverage can be most instructive, mediating that link between the political performances presented within the films and the receptions of those performances among the broader community – from ordinary audience members, to activists, corporate bodies and politicians. As seen in the previous two case studies and, as will be argued later with regards to *An Inconvenient Truth*, the perceived quality of these performances plays a key role in how the political messages of these films are framed and discussed within the news media.

The Spectacle of An Inconvenient Truth

The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) defines climate change as change which "occurs because of internal changes within the climate system or in the interaction between its components, or because of changes in external forcing either for natural reasons or because of human activities" (IPCC 1995). Understanding the contribution of human activities to climate change has been the driving force behind both climate change science and climate change politics over the past few decades. The issue has conjured apocalyptic images of humankind tipping the balance of our environment to the point where our whole existence will be threatened by a range of environmental catastrophes – from droughts and floods, to fierce storms or pandemics triggered by changing climatic conditions. On the other hand, because the issue lies in the obscure realm of climate science while also cutting to the very heart of how we as humans live, there has been much debate about the precise nature and extent of human-induced (anthropogenic) climate change and what (if anything) should be done about it.

A number of scholars (see Beck 2009; Boykoff & Boykoff 2007; Cottle 2009; Wilson 2000) have noted the media's centrality to climate change politics. They play a key role in transmitting complex scientific and policy information to the public as well as providing a forum for many divergent views. Kris Wilson's (2000) analysis of climate change in the media notes that one of the major issues affecting climate change politics is a lack of understanding both within the media and the public more broadly:

> the global warming story is one of the most complicated stories of our time. It involves abstract and probabilistic science, labyrinthine laws, grandstanding politicians, speculative economics, and the complex interplay of individuals and societies. (Wilson 2000: 206, citing Stocking & Leonard 1990)

This places considerable demands on journalists, politicians, campaigners and other public communicators when it comes to communicating information on this issue. It is not surprising therefore, that spectacular and symbolic imagery which can condense and simplify complex information has become a feature of public communication about climate change, with *An Inconvenient Truth* providing no exception (see O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole 2009; Wilson 2000). As Ulrich Beck has argued, "the catastrophic consequences of climate change must... be *made visible*, that is, they must be effectively staged in order to generate pressure for action" (2009: 86).

During the film we see cities smothered in smog, factory chimneys billowing menacingly over residential neighbourhoods, dried sea-beds, melting glaciers and refugees fleeing sodden flood zones. Images of storm and fire provide an evocative supplement to Gore's scientific arguments about climate change. Davis Guggenheim's commentary on the film explains how part of the motivation for these scenes came from a desire to engage audiences emotionally. They were included, he says, because the producers of the film wanted to ensure that viewers "felt the urgency of the issue right up... you had to feel viscerally" (Guggenheim 2006). These images of catastrophe serve to communicate the dire consequences of climate change as they alert us to the damage done and the damage yet to come.

Spectacular imagery has been a staple feature throughout the history of environmental politics (see Allan et al. 2001; DeLuca 1999; Manning 2001). Within the context of climate change communication, images of waves lashing a coastline, trees bending in the wind, ice-bergs crumbling, or smoke pouring out of factories are just some of the many shared cultural symbols which have come to characterise and represent this

issue (O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole 2009). Cottle argues that it is these images which help render "the abstract science of climate change... culturally meaningful and environmentally consequential" (2009: 85). Cottle's ideas are informed, in part by the writing of Ulrich Beck whose concept of staging provides a useful way of conceptualising *An Inconvenient Truth*'s spectacular and symbolic representations of climate change.

According to Beck, in a society characterised by imminent, pervasive, but essentially unknowable threats – of which climate change certainly qualifies – the concept of "staging" becomes crucial. "Staging" is the means through which the prospect of impending catastrophe is made visible and 'real', and this is done almost exclusively through the media. In such an environment, Beck argues:

> Tangible, simplifying symbols, in which cultural nerve fibres are touched and alarmed... take on central importance. These symbols have to be produced or forged in the open fire of conflict provocation, before the strained and terrified public of television viewers. (Beck 2009: 98)

Beck goes on to cite the climate change report from British economist Nicholas Stern – the so-called *Stern Review* released in November 2006 – as an "extremely skilful piece of staging" which, in describing the devastation wrought by unchecked climate change "counteract[s] the abstractness of climate change and render[s] the invisible visible" (2009: 85). Such a view emphasises the power of symbolism and narrative as effective and it highlights one way of understanding *An Inconvenient Truth's* contribution to public knowledge. The images of crumbling glaciers, raging storms and drowning cities may have struck some viewers of *An Inconvenient Truth* as alarmist (see below) but according to Beck's view, such representations can actually play a vital role in making the future threat of climate change known and accessible.

This concept of staging provides a compelling means of understanding the spectacular nature of all three popular political documentaries discussed in this thesis. We have seen the bloodied victims of war flash vividly in and out of *Fahrenheit 9/11* and the harrowing unveiling of Lila Lipscomb's grief, despair and finally anger. We have witnessed *Super Size Me*'s obsessive visualisation of everything that goes into and, at times, out of Spurlock's body; and we have *An Inconvenient Truth*'s scenes of environmental devastation. These films thus visualise and make 'real' the issues they address, styling themselves as alternative representations of the issue in question. To communicate the science of melting ice caps, *An Inconvenient Truth* uses not only graphs, charts and images of the ice, but also the simple but arresting sequence of an animated polar bear struggling to find refuge amid the melting ice caps. The film's popularity projected such images into mainstream and thus bolstered the collective stock of symbolic resources available for the public to construct meanings about climate change (see Lester & Cottle 2009). In much the same way, *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *Super Size Me* delivered their own set of evocative images and sequences – their own pieces of staging – which, by virtue of their popularity, were disseminated on a scale unprecedented for the documentary.

Of course, as has been noted earlier in this thesis, the use of spectacular imagery and emotive symbols is seen by many to have, at best, ambivalent consequences (see Cottle 2009; O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole 2009). In the *Fahrenheit 9/11* chapter, we saw how such forms of communication were often construed as propaganda. Corner and Richardson have argued that symbolic forms of environmental communication can potentially elude those "cognitive filters upon which scepticism depends," while also "bypassing evidential reasoning and the proprieties of debate" (1993: 228).

Another perceived negative of such forms of communication worth discussing here is that, in bombarding viewers with images of catastrophe or suffering, these films actually alienate viewers, engendering apathy and detachment while offering little scope for engagement or agency (see Moeller 1999). To develop this point further, it is worth looking at some critiques of *An Inconvenient Truth* which argue just that.

During the film, Gore concludes a sequence of images and anecdotes relating to the consequences of climate change by observing that the situation is "almost like a nature hike through the Book of Revelations." Such commentary emphasises the "apocalyptic" quality of much of *An Inconvenient Truth*, which in turn has become a topic of discussion in a number of analyses of the film (see Frentz & Rosteck 2009; Johnson 2009; Nordhaus & Shellenberger 2007; Spoel et al. 2009). While perspectives on this feature of *An Inconvenient Truth* differ markedly, there is a common concern that representing the issue in such a way stifles the potential of the film to influence audiences to change their behaviour. Nordhaus and Shellenberger, for example, argue that despite the film's commercial success and widespread media coverage, it essentially fails in its mission to inspire action on climate change:

> There was nothing in the movie or the accompanying book aimed at helping viewers or readers imagine a brighter future for themselves and their families. Gore could have dedicated the last half of his slideshow to describing an inspiring vision of the future, one centred on the creation of new jobs, new cities, and new profits out of new clean-energy industries... Instead, Gore spoke almost entirely of nightmares. (2007: 106)

Laura Johnson argues that "the vividness of the disaster imagery, especially as it has become conventionalized in environmental discourse, risks overshooting the goal of inspiring action precisely *because* it so frequently attends to irreparability more thoroughly than to repair" (2009: 32). The general argument here is that audiences encounter something of a paralysis as they are bombarded with imagery that invites

awe but then detachment. A study by O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole (2009) found that stirring images of disaster and catastrophe elevated the importance of climate change for viewers while at the same time decreasing their sense of individual efficacy in the face of such threat.

An Inconvenient Truth speaks to these concerns towards the end of the film, with Gore noting how: "there are a lot of people who go from denial to despair, without pausing at the intermediate step of actually *doing* something about the problem". Nevertheless, according to Nordhaus and Shellenberger, "Gore's heart doesn't seem to be in it" (2007: 106). In a film spanning 92 minutes, their argument has some merit considering that solutions to the problem of climate change are only discussed with only about five minutes left before the credits begin rolling.

Herein lies one of the crucial points to consider when assessing the textual properties of popular political documentaries. As discussed earlier, these films explicitly enact a *call to action. Fahrenheit 9/11* became a rallying point for those advocating for change in the White House. *Super Size Me* advises (citizen) consumers on what demands they can make on fast-food corporations. And, towards the end of the film, *An Inconvenient Truth* advises viewers on what they can do to make a difference in the fight against global warming – such as switching to hybrid cars, recycling or using energy-efficient light-bulbs. However, questions remain as to what capacity these films actually have to inspire action among individual audience members.

Lilie Chouliaraki's (2006) study on televisual representations of suffering ponders similar questions in relation to how images of distant suffering ("the spectacle of

suffering") can inspire or invoke either feelings of pity, empathy or compassion, or those of detachment, fatigue and powerlessness on the part of the viewer. She makes the point that:

> The spectators of the news are themselves part of the news narrative, in so far as it puts spectators in the position of voyeurs of the pain of the 'other', philanthropists or activists who exercise some form of effective speech vis-à-vis the suffering they watch. (Chouliaraki 2006: 11)

Although the terms here are slightly different in relation to *AIT* – the 'other' is the threatened environment or future populations, not the victimised human – the same argument applies. Viewers of *An Inconvenient Truth* are part of the narrative, although their actual position and agency within this narrative is up for debate. According to Nordhaus and Shellenberger (2007), viewers of *An Inconvenient Truth* who accept its arguments about climate change are positioned with minimal agency or hope that their individual actions can cause a difference. Under the weight of spectacular imagery, which constructs the natural environment as something damaged beyond repair, viewers of *An Inconvenient Truth* are left with little more than resignation in the face of insurmountable odds – or so the argument goes.

Cottle's (2009) analysis of news media coverage of climate change makes a similar point in relation to the use of spectacular imagery. While acknowledging the role such forms of communication can have in raising awareness, he laments that:

> the news media can all too easily position us as voyeurs only of impending catastrophe. There is, in other words, a profound disconnect between the news mediated realization of climate change as a major threat to humanity and what exactly we as news readers, viewers and potential 'publics' can do about it based on the information, predictions and spectacular pictures offered to us of the world's ecosystems now under threat. (2009: 91)

An Inconvenient Truth does offer some ideas as to what we as viewers can do about climate change, but the criticisms listed here promote caution as to what conclusions

we can make about the impact or influence of the film. However, as has been argued throughout this thesis, the analysis of what these films mean does not end with what is contained within the filmic text. To better understand the contribution made by the spectacle of *An Inconvenient Truth*, we need to look at what elements of the film were 'picked up' and circulated within the broader media environment and how the film was incorporated into a broader mediated discussion about climate change.

SPEAKING TRANS-NATIONALLY

Addressing the Globe

In the two case studies covered thus far, we have seen the trans-national reach of the films channelled through the ubiquity of American culture. Despite focussing on American politics and American public health and fast-food corporations respectively, the issues addressed in the first two films addressed audiences across the globe. In some ways, *An Inconvenient Truth* is no different. When Gore talks of a failure to sign the Kyoto Protocol, or the failure to curb greenhouse emissions, the 'we' being referenced is American. Likewise, when he recounts some of humanity's triumphs in overcoming adversity, many of the milestones referenced, such as the war of independence, belong to a distinctly American audience. Nevertheless, the film's engagement with a global environmental issue imbues it with a different register to the other films discussed. As will be argued below, the audience addressed by *An Inconvenient Truth* has an explicitly global dimension.

Images of Earth, as seen from space, book-end *An Inconvenient Truth*'s narrative. In the early stages of the film, Gore presents an image which he claims to be "the most reproduced image in history" – a full colour image of the planet. Allan et al. note that images of Earth, taken during the American 'space age' of the late 1960s, early 1970s, had a formative influence on what would become a global environmental movement:

> ... startling images of planet Earth were relayed from the surface of the moon, the impact of which – many have maintained since – fundamentally recast the environmental perceptions of what was for a fleeting instant a near-global citizenry. (Allan et al. 2000: 3; see also Dryzek 1997)

The use of this image so early in the film helps establish a global mode of address, itself a characteristic of much environmental discourse (Beck 2009; Allan et al. 2000). Indeed, the nature of climate change – its representation as a global catastrophe-in-waiting – arguably encourages a more global sensibility. According to Beck, "global threats [such as climate change] found global commonalities, indeed a (virtual) global public sphere is taking shape" (2009: 81). Over the course of the film, the impacts of climate change presented are geographically disparate – from floods in Shanghai, to shrinking glaciers in Argentina and 'climate change refugees' in the Pacific.

Towards the end of *An Inconvenient Truth*, Gore presents another image of the Earth, this one taken from much further out in space:

> ...you see that pale blue dot? That's us. Everything that has ever happened in all of human history has happened on that pixel. All the triumphs, all the tragedies, all the wars, all the famines, all the major advances; it's our only home.[34]

According to Szerszynski and Toogood (2000), images of the Earth possess an alluring suggestion that we all share a singular place (see also Szersynski & Urry 2002). *An Inconvenient Truth*'s use of such images can thus be seen to encourage

[34] Interestingly, this image appears to be the inspiration for the closing scene of the animated film *Wall-E* (2008) which also confronts the problem of climate change.

viewers to adopt a globally minded consciousness. It is also worth pointing out that certain places or images can also come to represent the "global" environment (Szersyzynski & Toogood 2000; Szerszynski, Urry & Myers 2000). Many of *AIT*'s images referred to earlier – the crumbling ice-bergs or a river winding through rainforest – arguably represent a more general and 'global' sense of the environment, rather than referring to a specific place.

Corresponding with Crisis

At the time of the *An Inconvenient Truth*'s Australian release, broad swathes of the Australian community were experiencing what scientists were calling "a one in a thousand year drought" (ABC 2006). Water shortages as well as reports on the degradation of iconic environmental attractions like the Great Barrier Reef and warnings of bushfires of greater intensity and regularity served to sharpen concerns about climate change within the Australian community.

Alongside these problems confronting the Australian environment, it is worth noting some key events which, although they occurred after the film's release, influenced the press coverage of climate change and thus may have also influenced the placement of *An Inconvenient Truth* within such coverage. As mentioned earlier, there was the release of the Stern Review in October 2006 which assessed the economic impacts of climate change. The review made international news in its claim that the economic costs of doing nothing on climate change significantly outstripped those acquired through adopting immediate policy measures to reduce carbon emissions. A few months later, the IPCC released the first part of their Fourth Assessment Report on

climate change which argued, more forcefully than ever, that climate change was most likely caused by human activity, providing further pressure from the scientific community for a major policy response. Finally, it should be noted that in December 2006, Kevin Rudd became leader of the Australian Labor Party leading into an election year in which climate change was to become a central issue.

The above paragraphs provide some general indicators of the growing intensity of the climate change crisis within Australia – a crisis in the sense that it was represented as a grave threat to society and was characterised by heightened levels of dispute between political groups, scientists and other claims-makers. As noted in the previous chapter, the media are indelibly linked to the gestation and lifespan of contemporary crises, capable of producing and sustaining them, while also capable of shielding them from view. Furthermore, their representation of a crisis can serve to reinforce existing power structures or, alternately, they can signal a more discursively open environment in which entrenched values and positions are challenged, and a greater diversity of voices are heard (Cottle 2009). Like the previous two case studies, we can see how *An Inconvenient Truth* was positioned to make a prominent entry into this complex media/crisis dynamic. And, while further analysis will be offered below, this correspondence with crisis represents a core feature of popular political documentaries and should thus be regarded as a key source of their magnetism.

AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH IN THE AUSTRALIAN PRESS

An Inconvenient Truth appeared within a diverse array of contexts within the Australian press. Among the more prominent were:

- pre-release publicity from both supporters and detractors of the film, including Al Gore's visit to promote the film
- News, reviews and op-ed pieces published after the film's official release
- Profiles of Al Gore
- Comments from Australian politicians, scientists, environmental groups and the business community about the film and climate change more broadly
- A return visit to Australia by Al Gore in November
- Editorials outlining each newspaper's position on climate change
- Coverage of climate change politics, including the release of the Stern Review, the IPCC report and the looming Australian federal election
- The film winning the Academy Award for Best Documentary in February 2007[35]

It is possible to discern a number of news values propelling this coverage, including Gore's own membership of the *power elite*, the *magnitude* of the climate change issue, the *entertainment* angle, and the comments Gore made about Australia being "more at risk than any other nation" which increased the film's *relevance* for local journalists (Harcup 2004). Previous studies of the interaction between news values (or norms) have shown how personalisation, dramatisation, novelty, proximity and relevance are driving forces behind climate change coverage (Boykoff & Boykoff 2007; Carvalho & Burgess 2005).

[35] see Bruce 2006; Burns 2006; *Herald Sun* 2006; *The Age* 2006; Warren 2007; Ziffer 2006 in Appendix 1.

On a very basic level then, we can see how the release of *An Inconvenient Truth* helped to fuel an increase in climate change coverage more broadly. The film featured regularly in the press from May 2006 onwards to June 2007 where analysis was halted as the press began to focus on Gore's involvement in the Live Earth concerts of July 2007. In this 14 month period, the film was mentioned in 740 articles across the three newspapers analysed in this study. Like the other two case studies, this coverage extended across the news pages, features, opinion columns, business section and arts and entertainment supplements. This coverage occurred within a dramatic increase of climate change coverage – from 1216 stories in 2005, to 3012 in 2006, and 7378 in 2007.[36]

The extended time frame of analysis here (14 months as compared to the other two case studies) is a reflection of the film's longevity within mediated climate change discourse in Australia. This feature alone is worthy of further investigation and, as will be argued below, it was driven by the actions of Gore and others in promoting the film and by the increasing political salience of the climate change issue. Over this 14 month period, representations of *An Inconvenient Truth* varied in frequency, style and context. These variations occurred across time but also between publications. Therefore, while the following analysis is structured around different periods of coverage, the differences between newspapers will also be a core feature of discussion.

[36] Based on a search for "climate change" OR "global warming" on the Newstext database (*The Australian* and *Herald Sun*) and Fairfax Digital, The Age 2006 CD-Rom and the ANZ Reference Centre (*The Age*).

Pre-Release (1 May – 14 September)

Much of the early coverage of *An Inconvenient Truth* in Australia focused on the film's international success and speculation over whether it would be used as a springboard for a Gore presidential run in 2008 (*The Australian*, 20.05.06, p. 15; Elliott, *The Australian*, 02.09.06, p. 25). However, an article appearing on 8 August in *The Australian* (p. 12) provided an ominous sign of some of the opposition the film's message would encounter. The article was written by Danish academic Bjorn Lomborg, author of *The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the World*, who argues that combating climate change should not be an immediate public policy priority and that any money spent on the issue would be better directed towards combating HIV/AIDS, malnutrition and barriers to free trade. Lomborg's views would figure prominently in *The Australian*'s editorial response to the film which, while acknowledging the "valuable role" played by Gore in "popularising the debate on the vexed issue of global warming," sided with Lomborg by arguing that the "real cost of climate change" involves denying higher living standards to "hundreds of millions of people in the developing world who stand to benefit from industrialisation" (12.09.06, p. 13). *The Australian*'s environmental reporter, Matthew Warren, adopted a similar approach in his lament that the film "rather glibly skates over the other frightening aspect of the debate – the cost of cutting greenhouse gas emissions in the scale needed to actually reduce the impact of global warming" (*The Australian*, 11.09.06, p. 2).

The above articles are emblematic of the opposition the film encountered within the Australian press in the days and weeks prior to its release. A pre-release review of the film in the *Herald Sun* gave the film one star, describing Gore alternately as a "sore

loser" and a "Billy Graham of the meltdown movement", while the film itself is portrayed as "silky and seductive" that only presents "one side of the story" (Forbes, 10.09.06, p. E09). Two further op-ed pieces delivered in the same newspaper in the following days reinforced this message. Business writer Terry McCrann described the piece as "a mix of scary exaggeration and rebuttable factoids" comparing Gore to Bob Brown, the leader of the Australian Greens Party (*Herald Sun*, 12.09.06, p. 27). Meanwhile, right-wing columnist Andrew Bolt predictably denounced the film as a piece of "ludicrous scaremongering" (13.09.06, p. 21). The piece drew upon comments from renowned climate change sceptics and deniers Richard Lindzen, Sallie Baliunas, Fred Singer and Frederick Seitz among others.

The two news stories (as distinct from opinion pieces) that appeared in the *Herald Sun* prior to the film's release were concerned with the refusal of the Australian Prime Minister to meet Al Gore during his promotional visit (11.09.06, p. 11) and Gore defending "his movie amid claims he exaggerated some of the scientific findings discussed within it" (12.09.06, p. 2). *The Australian* contained further negative coverage in feature and opinion pieces detailing the rising salience of the climate change issue on the world stage. Australian climate change sceptic Bob Carter was the first source quoted in a story about global climate change politics, describing the film's arguments as "so weak that they are pathetic" (*The Australian*, 02.09.06, p. 17). The following paragraph went on to claim that "despite nearly two decades of consolidated research on the subject, there is still limited agreement about climate change science". This contradicts claims made within the film, by the IPCC and others that there is "a remarkably high level of scientific consensus" on this issue (Boykoff & Boykoff 2007: 1191; Fyfe 2004).

Further criticisms came in the form of an opinion article written by another noted sceptic, William Kininmonth who argued that "sober, rational analysis of some scientific facts" was missing from the debate (*The Australian*, 12.09.06, p. 12). The film certainly received a terse response from the Australian Prime Minister John Howard who, in an interview appearing in *The Australian* quipped: "... I don't take policy advice from films" (11.09.06, p. 9). Nevertheless, Gore was able to defend both the film and the science of climate change in an article on 11 September in which he was quoted extensively (Bodey, *The Australian*, 11.09.06, p. 2). However, doubts remained about the film, which was described as "a slick presentation" and "contentious."

Taken together, the pre-release coverage that appeared in *The Australian* and the *Herald Sun* lent the film prominence while cloaking it in doubt if not scorn. Crucially, this coverage occurred before the film's general release, priming readers with a particular take on the film before most had a chance to see it. While the film does have its contentious moments, the overwhelming negativity of these articles invites further reflection on the forces propelling such coverage. Firstly, it should be noted that the majority of the articles mentioned above were op-ed pieces. As noted in an earlier chapter, the op-ed pages often correspond with the political orientation of the newspaper and they are a focal point for the establishment of a newspaper's voice and identity (see Wahl-Jorgensen 2008a). Here, they can be read as an attempt to assert a pre-emptive framework for not only interpreting the film, but also for approaching the politics of climate change.

The political identity of a newspaper has been shown to have a role in shaping a newspaper's representation of climate change and climate change politics (Carvalho 2007). Carvalho's study of climate change in the British press found that various newspapers responded to political and scientific developments on climate change in ways that corresponded with their own ideological outlooks. When the political ramifications of climate change science appeared to "constitute a threat to ideological principles and arrangements in the political, social and economic realms," Carvalho argues that *The Times* magnified the minority views of sceptics and disputed the credibility of the IPCC in keeping with their conservative agenda (2007: 237-38). In contrast *The Guardian*'s social-democratic outlook and, to a lesser extent, that of *The Independent's*, fuelled coverage that emphasised the risks of climate change and the high degree of scientific consensus to supplement their claims for strong political intervention (2007: 238). Carvalho thus argues that newspapers are actively involved in the "reconfiguring [of] the state of scientific knowledge in ways that justify and promote preferred courses of social, economic and political action" (2007: 238).

Carvalho's findings provide a useful guide for understanding these early representations of *An Inconvenient Truth*, particularly once we compare the coverage discussed thus far with that which appeared in *The Age*. Unlike *The Australian*, *The Age* was politically in favour of strong and immediate action on climate change. This was expressed in editorials such as that which urged the Australian government to sign the Kyoto Protocol, stating in its headline that "the excuses have dried up" (*The Age*, 15.10.06, p. 16). The pre-release coverage in *The Age* included a report on the controversy the film had stirred up overseas, noting both the positive reviews and the attacks the film had attracted, particularly from corporate-funded think tanks and PR

firms (Minchin, *The Age*, 09.09.06, p. 13). Another story appearing on the same page asked seven Australian scientists from Australia's government-funded research centre, the CSIRO, and the National Climate Centre to rate the film's scientific merit out of five. The seven reviews presented were uniformly positive, praising the science as "very sound," "technically brilliant, remarkably accurate... [and] easily the best documentary about global warming I've seen" (*The Age*, 09.09.06, p. 13).

Further news about *An Inconvenient Truth* in *The Age* included a report of Al Gore's visit to Australia which quoted him solely and extensively (Ziffer, *The Age*, 12.09.06, p. 7). Gore was quoted in the article claiming that climate change is "the most serious threat human civilisation has ever faced" and that its effects were already visible in Australia's water shortages, bushfires and bleached coral reefs (also covered in Bodey, *The Australian*, 11.09.06, p. 2) Two brief pieces on 5 September and 13 September noted the preview screenings of the film for federal politicians with the latter article noting that "climate change had a thorough going-over in the Australian Parliament this week – sparked by the flying visit of former American Veep Al Gore" (*The Age*, 13.09.04, p. 6; *The Age*, 5.09.04, p. 6). Coverage in *The Age* was thus characterised by a dearth of op-ed pieces, while the supportive voices of science and Gore himself were given prominence.

This analysis shows how *An Inconvenient Truth* became a fixture of the Australian press' representation of climate change before it had even been released. An array of interpretations was already circulating before most of the Australian public had been able to see the film. Before looking at how the film fared in the post-release coverage, it is worthwhile introducing a concept that will help clarify the nature of *An*

Inconvenient Truth's relationship with the Australian press as part of its broader contribution to public knowledge. As seen above, a similar brand of magnetism was at work in this film as that which was analysed in the previous two case studies. We can see how the film was granted access to the news media and how Gore was occasionally able to speak as a primary definer in ways that partially echo the *Fahrenheit 9/11* case study. Similarly, there are signs that the film acted as a trigger event that propelled climate change up the news media agenda in much the same way that *Super Size Me* did with the subject of obesity. However, the political context of the film's release, and the subsequent coverage it was afforded, encourages us to consider the film as a 'critical discourse moment.'

According to Gamson, critical discourse moments, "make discourse on an issue especially visible. They stimulate commentary in various public forums by sponsors of different frames, journalists, and other observers" (1992: 26 citing Chilton 1987). As discussed in an earlier chapter, they involve "events that potentially challenge existing discursive positions and constructs or, in contrast, may contribute to their further sedimentation" (Carvalho 2005: 6). There is a link here with notions of trigger events and agenda-setting discussed in the previous chapter, however, the idea of critical discourse moments is broader and thus more suited to dealing with an issue as complex as the media's representation of climate change. With the previous case study, concepts drawn from agenda-setting theory and research were useful for exploring how a relatively discrete issue like obesity appeared within the news. In this particular case, where a diverse range of positions, perspectives and interests are implicated within the press coverage of climate change, the concept of critical

discourse moments allows for a more flexible examination of *An Inconvenient Truth*'s coverage.

While the concept of critical discourse moments has some purchase on all three popular political documentaries studied, it is especially relevant to our understanding of *An Inconvenient Truth*. As seen above, the film's impending release drew sceptics, campaigners, politicians and scientists into the public arena, articulating a range of positions that in many ways reflected the breadth of climate change debate in Australia at this time. The range of pre-emptive critiques made against the film was perhaps indicative of its expected influence, as part of a broader shift in climate change politics in Australia. To explore this idea further, it is now worth considering some key features of the post-release press coverage of *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Post-Release

As noted earlier in this chapter, *An Inconvenient Truth* helped to transform the public image of Al Gore. He was hailed as "a new hero" for the Australian Left and "a leading voice" in the fight against global warming (Glover, 16.11.09, p. 10; *The Australian*, 01.03.07, p. 9) alongside the plaudits described earlier. Of course, as seen in the previous section, some interpreted this transformation as a cynical exercise of political self promotion (e.g. Forbes, *Herald Sun* 10.09.06, p. E09). Nevertheless, it should be noted that Gore's public image was not the only transformation commented upon by the Australian press in the weeks and months following the film's release. Rather, for a range of journalists and columnists, the film was implicated in a much more profound transformation of climate change politics in Australia.

Signs of the film's potential impact began appearing in the days following its release. Bearing in mind the political outlooks discussed previously, it is perhaps not surprising that *The Age* chose to focus on the film's reception in Canberra, the centre of Australian politics. "Gore's cinematic statement has Canberra's pontificators chirping" read the headline of one article (Topsfield, 16.09.06, p. 9) while another featured a series of politicians reviewing the film under the heading "Politicians rate An Inconvenient Truth" (16.09.06, p. 9). The first article began with the following introduction:

> Question time in Parliament is generally reserved for more erudite topics than whether the PM has seen the last movie. Not last week.
>
> The topic du jour was former US vice-president-cum-filmmaker Al Gore's movie, An Inconvenient Truth, which has been described as a cross between a "horror film with all the trappings – death, destruction and heart-stopping side-effects" and a personal slide show. (*The* Age, 16.09.06, p. 9)

The movie received a five-out-of-five rating from the Opposition Environment spokesperson at the time, Anthony Albanese:

> The great thing about this film, and I'm being very careful to call it a documentary and not a movie, is that climate change is presented in a very graphic way. This is compulsive viewing for everyone concerned about the future of the planet. (*The* Age, 16.09.06, p. 9)

Albanese's endorsement was echoed by the government's then Environment Minister, Ian Campbell, who stated in a separate article that: "My most respected scientists concur with me that the science in vice-president Gore's movie is sound and solid" (qtd in Ong, *The Australian*, 18.09.06, p. 3; see also *Herald Sun*, 18.09.06, p. 12). John Howard eventually got around to watching the film, commenting that it displayed "a degree of the peeved politician" with its "constant jibes at the Bush Administration" (qtd in Grattan, *The Age*, 14.11.06, p. 7). As the government attempted to convince the electorate that they were serious about climate change, the

opposition responded that "After doing nothing for ten years on climate change, Mr Howard can't turn himself into Al Gore in one week" (Marris, *The Australian*, 3.02.07, p. 4). This coverage of Australian politicians engaging with the film and taking it seriously is indicative of the traction that both the film, and the issue of climate change, had gained within Australian politics.

Comments from Australian politicians aside, it would be the journalists and pundits themselves who would produce the most telling evidence of the film's influence on climate change politics. At a basic level, journalism is an attempt to interpret, define and represent reality. In the months following *An Inconvenient Truth*'s release, the Australian press came to interpret and define the film as a powerful force shaping climate change debate in Australia. Sceptical voices like John Ferguson, a columnist for the *Herald Sun*, conceded that "Al Gore has won the global warming debate even if he is wrong in fact" (19.09.06, p. 21). An editorial in *The Australian* cited "the popularity of Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*" among a "confluence of events" that has "produced a perfect storm that demands a political response" (05.02.06, p. 9). A report in *The Age* noted how: "politically, climate change is creeping up on the government. Al Gore's visit and film *An Inconvenient Truth* attracted much attention" (Grattan, *The Age*, 13.10.06, p. 15).

Despite the considerable critiques that the film encountered both before and immediately after its release, its presence within the Australian press came to be characterised by this acknowledgement of the film's impact and power. Another article from *The Australian* lists the film alongside the drought and the Stern Report as factors which have "floored public and corporate resistance to the threat" (Warren,

03.02.06, p. 19). An article in *The Age* noted the growing public interest in carbon offsets "particularly in the wake of Mr Gore's film..." (Smith, 16.09.06, p. 9). Another reporter reflected how "a few months back, the suave Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* broke open a wave of popular Australian concern about planetary degradation and sustainability that must have turned longer-term, harder-core environmental activists a tinge green with campaign envy" (Cica, *The Age*, 27.12.06, p. 13). These are just a sample of the views which drew a direct line of influence between the film and climate change politics in Australia. Significantly, such coverage occurred against the backdrop of the News Corporation (publisher of *The Australian* and the *Herald Sun*) publicly committing itself to the climate change cause, with their 2006 general meeting featuring a special screening of *An Inconvenient Truth* (Hinsliff 2006).

A key question that arises when considering popular political documentaries is that of what this popularity actually means. All three case studies have explored how each film achieved unprecedented popularity and how this then shaped their contribution to public knowledge. More so than the previous two however, this particular case study finds the news media asking and then answering the same question. As journalists recognised that climate change had become the political "issue of the year" (Cica, *The Age*, 27.12.06, p. 13), and "arguably the defining issue of our times" (Gilding, *The* Australian, 10.02.07, p. 19), they sought out explanations. What we read in the paragraphs above is a summarised rendering of what Brian McNair has called journalism's "interpretative moment," referring to "spaces in the public sphere where evaluation of, and opinion about either the substance, the style, the policy content or the process of public affairs replaces the straight reportage of new information"

(2000: 61). Across the ideological divides separating the Australian newspapers' interpretation of climate change politics, we find a consistent claim that this film *mattered.* Despite the early attempts to dismiss the film's message, the coverage that continued well into 2007 came to define *An Inconvenient Truth* as a significant component of Australian climate change politics.

Ramifications

The relationship between *An Inconvenient Truth* and the Australian press described above invites reflection on the media's engagement with climate change politics. As noted previously, the media plays a central role within climate change politics and has already been the focus of much research (see Boykoff & Boykoff 2007; Carvalho 2007, 2005; Cottle 2009). Among the more relevant studies here is Boykoff and Boykoff's (2007) analysis of news media coverage of climate change in the United States between 1988 and 2004. The study charts the way climate change coverage has fluctuated over a significant period of time while interpreting these changes through a consideration of journalistic norms. At its heart, the study is an attempt to understand why high levels of scientific consensus concerning the scale, magnitude and causes of climate change have consistently faced an "informationally-deficient" treatment within the news media, in which either the issue itself or the high levels of scientific consensus are under-reported (Boykoff & Boykoff 2007: 1190). The journalistic norms (or values[37]) deemed most relevant by the authors include so-called first order norms of personalisation, dramatisation and novelty which, they argue, go on to influence second-order norms of authority-order and balance.

[37] 'Norms' is employed in this study in a similar fashion to "news values" – a point the authors acknowledge in a footnote (Boykoff & Boykoff 2007: 1191)

Significantly, their understanding of all these norms is negatively inflected. Personalisation is seen to downplay the 'big picture' issues in favour of personal narratives; dramatised news is seen to trivialise issues or avoid problems that cannot be rapidly explained; novelty is seen to favour new crises and events, rather than longer-running social problems (Boykoff & Boykoff 2007: 1192). Meanwhile, the second order norms identified are similarly conceived: the authority-order bias refers to the media's tendency to privilege authorities ("government officials, business leaders, and others") in their coverage of major public issues who are then likely to "reassure the public that order, safety, and security will soon be restored" (2007: 1193 citing Bennett 2002); balance is seen as legitimising climate change sceptics or deniers who, despite their minority views, are able to exploit this norm by receiving a prominent hearing within the press and promoting "an aura of scientific uncertainty" (Boykoff & Boykoff 2007: 1193).

From the outset then, it should be noted that Boykoff and Boykoff's study offers an imbalanced account of journalistic behaviour. As argued in previous chapters, contingency and complexity are core features of contemporary news production, meaning that the norms identified in this study do not necessarily produce the type of consequences that the authors identify. Personalisation, for example, can certainly be associated with a neglect of the big issues as Boykoff and Boykoff argue. However it can also provide an evocative entry point for audiences to engage more concretely with an issue, while at the same time expanding the potential for ordinary people to be heard (see Dahlgren 1995). Likewise, dramatised news may trivialise important topics while also triggering more expansive and reflective coverage; indeed, according to

Beck (2009) and Cottle (2009), the drama provided by symbolic and spectacular imagery is one of the key resources through which both the current and future threats of climate change are communicated to lay audiences. Furthermore, as close to two decades of media research has recognised (Manning 2001; Schlesinger 1990), the relationship between voices of authority and the construction of news is complex and contested. While the politically and financially powerful often enjoy distinct advantages when it comes to accessing the news and promoting their interests, they do not simply get it all their own way.

In the case of *An Inconvenient Truth*, we can see the factors identified by Boykoff and Boykoff at work within the Australian press coverage of the film. The film provided a personal, dramatic and novel intervention into climate change politics that helped attract the press' attention. In due course, the coverage of the film included significant emphasis on these factors, from profiles of Al Gore, to reviews of the film concerned with both its politics and its entertainment value. However, it is difficult to argue that such coverage constituted an "informationally-deficient" treatment of the issue. Rather, coverage of the film produced a wellspring of climate change opinion, where a wide range of views and perspectives were canvassed. As coverage continued, the film came to be understood as a key transformative moment in Australian climate change politics which, in the process, solidified climate change's status as a significant issue warranting rapid and decisive political action.

Green Politics, Global Citizenship and National Economies

As noted earlier, *An Inconvenient Truth* contained a number of sequences which encouraged audiences to imagine themselves as part of a shared, global community. While such representations are common within environmental discourse, it is worth considering how such perspectives fared within the press coverage of the film, and climate change politics more broadly. As will be argued below, one particular challenge to *An Inconvenient Truth*'s position of influence came from a broader discourse about politics and political communication which was deeply sceptical of so-called 'green politics.'

The start of *An Inconvenient Truth* features a quaint, riverside setting, accompanied by Gore's almost-whispered narration:

> You look at the river gently flowing by. You look at the leaves rustling with the wind. You hear the birds. You hear the tree frogs. In the distance, you hear a cow. You feel the grass. The mud gives a little bit on the riverbank. Its quiet; its peaceful. And all of a sudden, it's a gear shift inside you. And it's like taking a deep breath and going, "Oh yeah, I forgot about this."

Some scholars have drawn a link here between this mode of representing nature and what they call the "American tradition of environmental rhapsody" (Johnson 2009; see also Frentz & Rosteck 2009). According to Johnson, this tradition posits nature as a "spiritual resource in the tradition of Henry Thoreau," and, despite its capacity to invoke strong emotional responses, its association with a romanticised view of the world means it "seems to carry little political weight" (2009: 33).

The political limitations of this tradition that Johnson identifies are readily apparent when one looks at Gore's political career. In 1992, George Bush Snr ridiculed Al Gore as "Ozone Man" after his book, *Earth in the Balance*, made the bestseller list of

The New York Times (see Remnick 2006). It was a nickname that plagued Gore throughout his career. Within *An Inconvenient Truth*, clips from Gore's political career include his struggle to get American politicians to take his message seriously.

Johnson's comments on the limitations of this particular brand of environmental rhetoric resonate within an Australian context as well. Libby Lester's account of the emerging Australian wilderness movement of the 1970s notes how green politics in Australia developed a "quasi-mystical fervour" which, despite being part of the movement's appeal, would also become a limitation (2007:32). For example, she quotes a senior journalist who noted that during a high-profile campaign of the 1970s, the so-called "greens" were seen by a number of senior media personnel as "just a scruffy mob of unemployed long-haired layabouts who had nothing better to do" (2007: 42). Earlier in this book, Lester cites the frustration of a particular wilderness campaigner during the 1990s who lamented that the movement's politics were characteristically represented by "feral-looking people... [who] were prevailed upon to sing a little song and do a little dance around the campfire for the cameras" (2007: 3).

Throughout the newspaper coverage of *An Inconvenient Truth*, there was a tendency in some quarters to link climate change politics to a questionable, if not dangerous, mode of political engagement. Commenting on the mainstream political acceptance of climate change, one columnist for *The Age* observed that "both parties are dancing around the edge of the ardent followers of environmentalism, the new godless religion" (Moran *The Age*, 24.11.07). A columnist for *The Australian* argued that "the rise of environmentalism parallels in time and place the decline of religion and

socialism," under the heading "Green lore now treated as gospel" (Kay, *The Australian*, 22.01.07, p. 8). Others commented on "this end-of-the-world religion of man-made warming" and the "self-appointed evangelism" of climate change campaigners (Bolt, *Herald Sun*, 13.09.07, p. 21; Warren, *The Australian*, 03.02.07, p. 19). Here we find a consistent, critical refrain which seeks to ostracise certain elements of this debate on the grounds that they transgress perceived "norms" of political discourse. These norms are revealed within the criticisms themselves, in comments such as "is healthy scepticism and fidelity to facts dead in this country?"; "what's missing from this debate is sober, rational analysis of some scientific facts"; "a back-to-basic science lesson would help to counter the hysteria over climate change"; "over-reacting on the basis of emotion, not fact" (Bolt, *Herald Sun*, 13.09.07, p. 21; Kininmonth, *The Australian*, 12.09.06, p. 12; Albrechtsen, *The Australian*, 28.02.07, p. 14). Articles such as these illustrate the extent to which the climate change campaign is deemed offensive to certain attitudes surrounding appropriate methods of political engagement. Of course, they can also be interpreted as attempts to discredit the movement rhetorically without having to actually engage them in a debate on the issue in question.

Another point of contention found within the coverage of *An Inconvenient Truth* concerned the perceived economic cost of climate change, weighed against the cost of implementing measures to curb its impact. This issue was raised within the film whereby Gore pokes fun at the implication inherent in this argument that the future of the whole planet (if we accept the dire prognoses of climate change), should be weighed against particular aspects of the economy. Nevertheless, this question about the economic costs of climate change action continues to be a defining feature of

climate change politics. A number of editorials appearing in *The Australian* are instructive here. On 1 February, 2007, the newspaper argued that "now is the time for cool heads on a hot topic. A prompt and decisive response is required. The greatest climate change danger today is for undue panic and a kneejerk response." Later, the same piece argued:

> *The Australian* accepts the scientific evidence that temperatures are rising and our parent company, News Corporation, has a policy to become "carbon neutral" by offsetting all its greenhouse gas emissions. But we also believe there is a long-term danger in over-stating the global-warming case. Much of what is being published about global warming is unsubstantiated and meaningless... It must always be considered whether more good can be done if finite resources are spent on the many problems that are more obvious and in need of urgent attention, such as the plight of tens of millions of Africans. (01.02.07, p. 13)

On 5 February, 2007, the editorial titled "Look before leaping in climate decisions" noted that the increasing political significance of climate change but argued, "the trouble is, the mad rush to claim to have the answers – and political advantage in a federal election year in Australia – brings a danger the nation will be saddled with bad policies that pander to an increasingly fearful electorate and damage its economic future" (05.02.07, p. 9). On 6 February, 2007, the editorial titled "Hothouse Politics" noted Australia's "negligible" contribution to global greenhouse emissions, noting that anything less than a global strategy of emission reduction would simply "hasten the transfer of jobs and economic activity to countries with less stringent environmental concerns" (06.02.07, p. 13). On 9 February, under the heading "Keeping the Message Cool on Climate" the same newspaper criticised noted climate change campaigner Tim Flannery as a "well documented global-warming extremist" with "deep-green anti-development, anti-immigration credentials" (09.02.07, p. 13). The following day, the editorial "Warming threat stokes election" contained the following argument:

> While the current global economic landscape has evolved in large part as a result of various nations exploiting their own climatic competitive advantages, it is unclear why a particular set of weather patterns, whether of today or 20 or 50 years ago, are so desirable that it is worth overturning the world economy in order to achieve them... The risk is in overresponding and consigning two billion people in India and China to poverty, with no chance of escape. (*The Australian*, 10.02.07, p. 18)

The frame adopted in *The Australian*'s editorial over this period is indicative of the widely held belief that responding to environmental concerns inevitably endangers economic prosperity.

In his exploration of environmental discourses, John Dryzek argues that the various approaches to environmental politics, or thinking about environmental politics, are characterised by a departure from "the long dominant discourse of industrial society" which "may be characterized in terms of its overarching commitment to growth in the quantity of goods and services produced and to the material well-being which that growth brings" (1997: 12). Dryzek notes that the departures of environmental discourses from industrialism can vary; he broadly classifies them as either reformist or radical (1997: 13-14). It is important to note that there is a broad range here: from discourses which view environmental issues as problems to be solved through tinkering with established systems of governance and economic production; to those who reject the prevailing industrial system outright and advocate for new ways of living (1997: 13-15).

While neatly conveying the distinctions between environmental discourses, Dryzek's analysis also provides a means of interpreting the arguments about climate change referenced above. The editorials from *The Australian* mobilise a discourse which remains deeply committed to economic growth or, as Dryzek labels it, a Promethean

discourse (1997: 45). It is a discourse which, as Dryzek argues, "assumes that growth is good... Thus there is a sense in which the political-economic discourse of liberal capitalist systems still generally floats free from any sense of environmental constraints" (1997: 46). Of course, acceptance of climate change as a legitimate political concern has, for the time-being, forced policy-makers to recognise that the status quo – the functioning of our current economic system – is having impacts which, if they remain unchecked, will potentially cause irreparable harm. Thus, this Promethean discourse faces some fundamental challenges from the increasing political salience of climate change. However, as these editorials suggest, the power of the Promethean discourse continues to hold a powerful interpretive sway within much of the mainstream media.

The above paragraphs illustrate the ways in which *An Inconvenient Truth* and the coverage surrounding it brought to the fore various conceptions of citizenship and public life. Often these conceptions clashed. While the film encourages a globally focussed mode of citizenship, one that reflects broader aspects of environmental politics, the coverage discussed above framed the issue as something affecting "our" jobs and "our" economy. It is here that cosmopolitan sentiment encounters a sense of economic parochialism which, it must be said, is not unfounded. As Anthony Giddens has noted, countries which choose to lead the way on climate change "could face problems of competitiveness. Their industries could be hampered by having to compete with goods that can be made more cheaply elsewhere where there are no environmental taxes or regulatory restrictions" (2009: 7). Such disputes are, of course, part of the unique challenges that climate change politics present.

When considering how popular political documentaries contribute to public knowledge, the above discussion highlights the capacity of these films to attract various points of view and thus highlight particular political fault-lines. With *An Inconvenient Truth*, fault-lines between the push for climate change action and the dominant political agenda of maximising economic growth became especially visible, as seen in the discussion above. Likewise, the attempts to label the push for climate change action as dangerous or irrational drew upon particular ideas of what politics is, and how it should be communicated. As seen in the previous case studies, similar dynamics were at work in the dispute surrounding *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s status as propaganda, or the attempts to discredit *Super Size Me*'s attack on McDonald's. In this way, popular political documentaries can be seen to attract not only different forms of media but also contending visions of politics, and different visions of citizenship.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored how *An Inconvenient Truth*'s capacity to traverse different media platforms while offering a personalised and spectacular representation of climate change enabled it to achieve a prominent position within popular culture. The popularity of the film, in turn, helped transform the public image of Al Gore who, through both the film and numerous inter-texts, was re-cast as a celebrity climate change activist.

The early coverage of the film within the Australian press highlighted sharp differences between the publications with the coverage seemingly filtered through

each newspaper's particular stance on climate change politics. These findings correspond with previous research on newspaper representations of climate change science and politics (Carvalho 2007). While the film provoked an array of reactions from various public figures, it was ultimately its sheer popularity that led the press to regard the film as something of a turning point within Australian climate change politics. The press interpreted *An Inconvenient Truth*'s popular success as a key catalyst behind climate change's growing salience as a national political issue. In this way, we can regard the film as a "critical discourse moment" within the press coverage of climate change politics, one that highlighted and then altered various ways in which the issue was reported.

Like the previous two case studies, *An Inconvenient Truth* offered a particular representation of citizenship which, in turn, found opposition within some of the press coverage. For much of the film, audiences were invited to consider themselves as part of a shared global community, while coverage of the film which focused on the economic costs and the various policy options for combating climate change staunchly referenced a national community. This conflict reflects the complexity of climate change politics itself, while also illustrating the tension between different types of solidarity encouraged and imagined within contemporary political discourse.

The findings presented in this chapter illustrate the transformative element of popular political documentaries. Whether it be in relation to Al Gore's image or climate change politics, the film's magnetism helped create a new cluster of meanings around these issues. For a period at least, no politician in Australia could credibly deny either the threat or the need for action on climate change, while Al Gore was able to use the

film as a springboard into other climate change initiatives, including the Live Earth concerts held in mid 2007.

CONCLUSION

The films studied in this thesis are highly commercial texts, produced within or distributed through corporate media networks. They do not speak about politics in rational, balanced or objective ways, eschewing many traditional documentary approaches in the process. Their politics, meanwhile, are mixed, offering different representations of citizenship, different types of solidarity, and different forms of advocacy as they target society's major powerbrokers. And, as the three case studies have demonstrated, they are also powerful, capable of making prominent and influential contributions to public knowledge. In this final chapter, the main findings of this study will be reviewed, alongside some discussion of further applications it has to the way we understand the media today.

FROM VISIBILITY TO INTERACTION TO MAGNETISM

As noted in the introduction, one of the most significant aspects of these films is their visibility. These films were prominent not only in cinemas, but also in newspaper reports, internet discussions, magazines and television. In today's environment, visibility is a key index of cultural and political power (Thompson 2005). At the same time, it can also be a source of vulnerability. As we have seen over the course of this thesis, the attention lavished on these films had ambivalent results. It increased their opportunities for influence and spread their critical messages while at the same time making them more vulnerable to attacks and criticism. With increased attention, these

films also became the site of contest between different meanings and interpretations which often reflected larger political struggles. We saw this in all three case studies where particular representations of these films could be linked to broader ideas about political communication, about the role of the media or, more specifically, about the political issues being discussed.

The visibility that these films acquired was fundamentally linked to their capacity to interact with other media. Each time these films appeared or were referenced in other media we find evidence of interaction. This interaction between the films and the broader media environment was approached in this thesis from a number of different perspectives.

Firstly, they were cast against the backdrop of a media environment undergoing some profound alterations. While these changes can be viewed in a number of different ways, two compelling ideas are provided by Brian McNair (2003, 2006) and Henry Jenkins (2006), who describe the prevailing conditions in terms of chaos and convergence respectively. As discussed in Chapter One, these trends encourage interaction between media in a number of different ways: from increases in the overall volume of media content, the tendency towards hybridisation of media content, the increasing competition between media outlets, the increased relative power of audiences to select and modify media according to their preferences, and the technological convergence of different media platforms. The net result of these changes is a media environment that is more complex, more unpredictable and more interactive than ever before.

Secondly, these interactions can be regarded as exchanges between different communicative spaces within the public sphere. There are a number of ways of splitting this: between popular entertainment and the traditional documentary, between popular political documentaries and the newspaper, between alternative media and mainstream media, between popular culture and the political culture, or between American culture and Australia. It is worth reviewing these interactions in some more detail.

Popular political documentaries were packaged and presented to audiences as mainstream entertainment. They appeared in cinemas alongside other Hollywood fare; they were distributed, if not produced, by major media corporations; their premieres attracted celebrities and heavy media coverage, and they were all subjects of aggressive multi-media marketing and public relations campaigns. Stylistically, these films borrowed just as much from the genres of popular entertainment as they did from traditional documentary approaches. Celebrity and performance were key issues in each case study, alongside their use of humour, spectacle and other links with popular media. The interaction between the spaces of popular entertainment and those of the documentary therefore occurs at all levels with these films – from their production and distribution, through to their actual content and reception. What we see in the popular political documentary is a hybridised form that defies neat categorisation. They push the boundaries of what is accepted practice for the documentary, which, in turn, influences the way they are received and interpreted more broadly.

The broader reception and interpretation of these films was investigated by analysing the coverage of these films within the Australian press. This interaction between the press and popular political documentaries can be understood as an exchange between different media forms and different media cultures. As noted in an earlier chapter, studying such interactions can inform our understanding of the changes occurring within the media (Blumler & Gurevitch 2005). As argued in Chapter One, the news media can be regarded as an interpretive audience that responds to and represents the social world in a particularly public way. The newspaper can thus be regarded as a particular kind of public archive, one that offers insights into the state of public knowledge within a community. Therefore this study of how the Australian press covered popular political documentaries can be read, on one level, as a study of how these films were received and interpreted by a particular section of the Australian public – the press – who in turn tried to represent and address the much broader public of their readerships.

The newspaper, like other news media organs, can also be regarded as a site of contest and struggle (Wolfsfeld 1997). Despite widespread changes within the media, it continues to occupy a privileged space over which various groups and interests jostle for access and attention. Therefore, the interaction between these films and the newspaper is about more than reception and interpretation, it is also about power.

As seen in each case study, the interaction between popular political documentaries and the press produced a range of ambivalent results. Firstly, by paying attention to these films and conferring column space, the press helped magnify the visibility of these films. Leaving aside the actual content of the coverage, the sheer quantity of

coverage helped make these films known on some level to vast numbers of people. The old adage, 'there's no such thing as bad publicity,' applies on some level here. For a new form of political communication to become visible, known and heard, as these films were able to do with the aid of the press, represents an important victory within today's increasingly cacophonous media landscape.

Aside from enhancing the visibility of these films, the press also coordinated a dialogue between popular political documentaries and other regions of society, in particular, the power elite. Journalists queried politicians and corporate spokespeople on whether or not they had seen these films, asking them for, and then publishing, the array of responses they offered. Crucial here is the underlying assumption that the popularity of these films was politically significant. As an interpretive audience, the press responded not only to the films, but also to the large numbers of people who turned out to watch them.

The dialogue and exchange presented within the newspaper coverage of these films offered evidence of the ways in which these films were able to engage the more formalised domains of political culture. As noted in the introduction we can think of politics in a number of different ways – from its broader cultural manifestations, through to its articulations within established government institutions (Craig 2004). A key concern of this thesis was to look for evidence of whether these films were able to transcend different political spaces. As each case study showed, Australian politicians were regular commentators on these films, while political analysts felt compelled to include them in their appraisals of the Australian political scene. This interaction

between popular culture and political culture thus occurred not only within the films, but also within the surrounding public debates and discussion.

The research presented in this thesis has added a much needed trans-national dimension to the literature on popular political documentaries. Like many American cultural products, these films were readily translatable into other cultural settings, particularly Australia where the cultural differences are perhaps less pronounced than other nations. Nevertheless, this interaction between American culture and Australian culture was marked by change and adaptation as the arguments of these films were integrated into more domestic political concerns. As shown in each case study, these films were alternately considered within the context of pre-election politics, Australian government foreign policy, its environment policies and commercial advertising aimed at children, among other domestic concerns. This complements previous studies which have emphasised the importance of reception contexts when examining cross-cultural media flows (Ang 1996).

Finally, this idea of interaction was approached from the perspective of audiences as well. By this, I mean that media interacting with other media can influence the meanings and interpretations we attach to the texts in question. This refers back to ideas of inter-textuality discussed in Chapter Two. These ideas encourage us to think of texts engaging one another in a continuous dialogue, and to thus acknowledge the complex and contingent ways in which we might interpret a given text. When thinking about how these films contribute to public knowledge, there is a need to consider this much broader inter-textual environment.

In focusing on media interactions, this thesis has introduced a new concept for describing the way popular political documentaries engage other media. The term 'magnetic media' calls attention to the complex and ambivalent ways that these films attracted attention that was, broadly speaking, both hostile and complimentary. Building on concepts drawn from sociological studies of the news, this idea of magnetic media was used to describe the diverse ways that each film engaged other media.

In the *Fahrenheit 9/11* case study, magnetism could be seen in the ability of the film to attract substantial coverage within which Moore and the film's distributors were able to speak prominently about the film, acting as primary definers within the news coverage (Hall et al. 1978). Their ability to do this lends credence to the idea that the contemporary media is less amenable to elite control than it was in times gone past (McNair 2006). This applies not only in the broader domain of popular culture, where films like *Fahrenheit 9/11* ascend to prominence, but also within the news media, where voices such as Moore's are able to gain considerable access. This also points to the porous nature of contemporary media where genres become blended while information and ideas flow across different media spaces. In acknowledging that point, it should also be noted that *Fahrenheit 9/11* was a site of contest and dispute within the Australian press. Much of the coverage focused on whether the film could legitimately be regarded as a documentary, while a number of prominent themes within the film, such as the plight of America's poor, were largely absent.

In the case of *Super Size Me*, the magnetic influence of the film helped trigger an increase in obesity coverage and broader press discussion about the role that fast-food corporations play in contributing to this problem in Australia. It also attracted a prominent response from McDonald's Australia who felt obliged to defend themselves publicly against the film. *Super Size Me* did not attract the same level of hostility as either *Fahrenheit 9/11* or *An Inconvenient Truth*. One reason for this may simply be its focus on a different arena of politics, namely that of the corporate world. Nevertheless, there was evidence that the film's insistence on the social responsibilities of corporations was resisted within various sections of the press, such as the editorial of *The Australian* which argued that the only "duty" of McDonald's was to its "shareholders" (*The Australian*, 30.06.04, p. 14). Such statements reflect a much larger discourse in which the market, despite its continuing advance into various arenas of cultural life, is portrayed as largely beyond the sphere of politics (see Miller 2007).

Finally, with *An Inconvenient Truth*, the magnetism of the film aided a transformation in Al Gore's public image from dour politician to celebrity activist. The film itself became a critical discourse moment within Australian climate change debate (Carvalho 2005; Gamson 1992). Evidence of this was found in the substantial coverage the film generated, particularly that which labelled the film as a key player in shifting public attitudes towards the issue. In this instance, the press, comprising a range of different voices, interpreted the film's popularity as evidence of the widespread public support for political action on climate change.

This case study also found that the political and scientific message of *An Inconvenient Truth* clashed with the political outlook of *The Australian* and, to a lesser extent, the *Herald Sun*. Their initial portrayals of the film and Al Gore promoted doubt about the film's scientific merit and the motivations behind it. These aspects of the coverage corresponded with the longer-running trend of climate change reportage in which the voices of climate change sceptics figured prominently (Cottle 2009; Wilson 2000). There were also elements within the coverage that cast suspicion over green politics more generally, likening it to a pseudo-religion with questionable validity within so-called rational politics.

To summarise then: magnetic media is a concept for understanding the unique interactions that occur between these films and other media, especially the news. This focus on the news acknowledges the news' cultural significance, as well as the commercial and political agendas behind these films which drive their promoters to target the news as a key audience. The idea of 'magnetism' references the capacity of these films to attract unprecedented attention from other media which, in turn, expands the range of meanings and interpretations that circulate around them. At the same time, this magnetism is considered as an inherently ambiguous force that engages other media in complex and unpredictable ways. There is a sense here that the meanings we derive from texts are malleable, susceptible to change as the environment surrounding the text changes. Thus we saw the interaction between these films and the press potentially both advancing their commercial and political prospects in some areas, while undermining them in others.

Magnetic media offers a way of understanding media texts that is sensitive to questions of context (including inter-textuality) and reception, as well as attending to the actual content of a given text. Crucially, it is a contingent view of media influence, one that recognises that, in a time of so-called media "chaos", power is fluid and can be exercised in unpredictable ways (McNair 2006). Popular films can influence the news agenda. Low budget documentaries can drag the behaviour of powerful corporations into a harsh and critical spotlight. Starring in a documentary can seemingly advance the cause for action on climate change more effectively than holding the post of vice-president. At the same time, becoming visible and attracting attention does not guarantee that particular messages will be heard or accepted. The paragraphs below will consider some of the limitations of this research while also looking at the ways in which this idea of magnetic media might be applied to other domains.

REVIEWING THE RESEARCH

The various trajectories along which these films travelled – from mainstream entertainment to the corridors of power – bestow lessons upon both media researchers and media practitioners, particularly those interested in how the media can be used for political agitation or advocacy. They highlight the inter-connected nature of contemporary media and the ways in which visibility, and potential influence, can be advanced through numerous media platforms. They also reinforce the continuing importance of celebrity and performance politics which, for better or worse, can be utilised for a diverse range of political action. Especially important in this regard is

the engagement with popular culture which can not only help in reaching a large audience but can then be interpreted as evidence of widespread political support.

The findings of this research illustrate the importance of developing research methods that can be adapted to different types of media. As noted in Chapter One there are plenty of ideas and opinions in circulation about the character, influence and value of popular political documentaries. They are regarded by some as a much-needed alternative to an anaemic news media. Others see them as corrosive, weakening the nature of public debate through their emphasis on emotion and spectacle at the expense of reason and fact. Others still, view them optimistically as a new brand of political communication that embraces the symbolic and affective nature of politics. None of these ideas are inherently wrong, and they do provide a range of useful perspectives through which we can appraise these films. However, they do serve to divert our attention away from some key features of these films, which include their visibility, linked to their interaction with other media, and the context of media change in which they were produced and encountered.

The research method adopted in this thesis sought to mirror the interactive nature of these films by drawing upon different research traditions. In studying the relationship between popular political documentaries and the press, it made sense to use approaches uniquely suited to each domain. This required viewing the films in ways that are typically reserved for social actors such as protest groups or corporations which try and influence the news agenda. This different approach to studying popular political documentaries makes sense when considering their explicit political agenda. That being said, it is certainly not the only way in which these films could be studied

and it is worth pausing here to consider what this research did not tell us and the potential ways in which these films might be further studied and understood.

Firstly, it would be a mistake to assume that the representations which appeared in the press can be seen as reflections of the full range of audience interpretations of these films. The press, after all, represented just one particular type of audience. One clear extension of research in this area would be to further incorporate other media, and other cultural contexts, into future analyses. One promising approach here would be an adaption of the research model employed by Liesbet van Zoonen (2005, 2007) in her study of the way viewers of television political dramas discussed the programs via online discussion forums. Such research would not evade the problems of representativeness discussed above, but it would potentially allow insights into how the internet provided a space for elaboration, debate and discussion among particular audience members. Furthermore, as van Zoonen argues, the posts on these forums can also be interpreted as particular kinds of "civic performance" – where audience members' public discussion of particular media can be read as a political act in itself (2007: 532-533).

Moving beyond the relationships between these films and other media, there are also opportunities to examine how other audiences, besides the press, used and interpreted these films. While some research has been done to examine how individual cinema-goers responded to films like *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Stroud 2007), further insights could be drawn from focusing enquiries on specific audience segments. In particular, research into the way various political actors, both within and outside the formal domain of politics, interpreted these films would further our understanding of the 'political'

within popular political documentaries. While the case studies provided *some* evidence here, more targeted research through interviewing or other appropriate methods would deepen our understanding of how these new forms of political communication are incorporated into the broader sphere of politics.

Since the release of *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2006, things have gone a little quiet for popular political documentaries. Michael Moore has continued his profitable output with *Sicko* (2007) and *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009) both performing well at the box office. In a similar vein to the films discussed at length in this thesis, both these films dealt with topical and divisive political issues – the problems with American public health care in the former, and the impact of untrammelled capitalism in the latter. However, from an Australian perspective at least, they were unable to excite the same level of interest and attention as his previous films.

Morgan Spurlock has continued his involvement with politically oriented documentaries, directing and starring in *Where in the World is Osama bin Laden?* (2008). With a contrived 'challenge' at its core – Spurlock sets out to find the world's most wanted terrorist – along with candid insights into Spurlock's personal life and a relaxed, informal tone, the film adopts many of the techniques and approaches witnessed in *Super Size Me.* Nevertheless, the film struggled at the box office, grossing well less that $US1 million worldwide (*Box Office Mojo*).

Meanwhile, the director of *An Inconvenient Truth*, Davis Guggenheim, has also continued to blend politics into his profession. He directed a 10 minute biographical film on Barack Obama which aired at the 2008 Democratic National Convention in

which Obama accepted his party's nomination for the presidency. In late 2010, he is due to release a feature-length documentary, *Waiting for Superman*, about the failures of the American public school system.

It is too early at this stage to ascertain whether the startling trend in which popular political documentaries emerged has now subsided, or whether we will again witness films achieve prominence and influence like those discussed in this thesis. At the very least, these documentaries have demonstrated how politically oriented media can achieve visibility and potential influence through engaging with popular culture. Indeed, it is on this broader point that we might find both a legacy of these films, and further examples of magnetic media in action.

In 2008, an international NGO called Action Against Hunger launched a campaign aiming to convince Al Gore to make a movie that would raise awareness of malnutrition, which according to the group, kills some 5 million children per year (Action Against Hunger 2008). Their website www.askalgoretomakethismovie.org, carries the following tagline under its heading "No Hunger": "ask Al Gore to make this film and & end childhood deaths from malnutrition" (Action Against Hunger 2008). Below this viewers are asked to add their name to an online petition to send to Gore. According to a spokesperson for the advertising company that designed the campaign, the focus on Gore was inspired by his success with *An Inconvenient Truth*: "Just as he used that power to raise awareness about climate change, we're asking that he use it for our campaign against hunger" (qtd in Abend 2009). Although there are no signs as yet that Gore will accept such a request, the group are already claiming

that the campaign has succeeded in drawing attention to the problem of childhood malnutrition (Abend 2009).

The mere existence of this campaign offers some indicator of the imprint that popular political documentaries have made on contemporary popular and political culture. They exist today as a highly effective form of political advocacy, one that has been used to promote action on a variety of issues. As argued in each case study, they represent new kinds of political performance, in which the popular and the political are combined in a uniquely prominent way.

The types of performance we witness in popular political documentaries both reflect and shape the prevailing state of political culture. As John Corner has argued, the resources used to construct various political personae "reflect and help shape the norms of politics and, indeed, what 'politics' popularly means" (Corner 2003: 83). We are thus encouraged to view the performances within popular political documentaries as part of a dialectic in which they are both drawn from the current stock of viable political roles, while also having the potential to influence the nature of political performances to come. Studies in the US have noted how the documentary has become an increasingly popular election campaign tool, although few of these films have achieved anything close to the popularity of the films discussed here (Benson & Snee 2008). As argued in Chapter Four, we can draw strong lines of correspondence between the early career success of Michael Moore and subsequent political documentaries, particularly *Super Size Me*. Likewise, the anecdote above offers an insight into how the popular political documentary may yet shape the field of political performance in the future.

While the above examples focus on direct lines of influence between popular political documentaries and subsequent forms of political communication, it is worth broadening our focus a little here to look at other ways in which the concept of magnetic media might be applied. Participant Media is an American production studio that "wants to entertain and inspire you to participate" (Participant 2010). The studio was one of the co-producers of *An Inconvenient Truth* and has been involved in a number of other documentaries and feature films. Some of their more notable releases include[38]: *Syriana* (2005) a feature concerned with the relationship between America's foreign policy and the oil industry; *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005) which recreates the confrontation between American news host Edward R. Murrow and Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s; *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008), a documentary focusing on the torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib; and *North Country* (2005) which re-tells the story of a woman battling sexual harassment and discrimination in an American mining town. Aside from their engagement with prominent political issues, Participant Media takes the business of entertainment seriously. Their films range from political thrillers and satire through to legal dramas and documentaries, and they are populated by some of Hollywood's finest, including George Clooney, Tom Hanks, Julia Roberts, Charlize Theron and Matt Damon.

Aside from this pronounced intermingling of entertainment, politics and celebrity, Participant Media is noteworthy for its "social action campaigns" which accompany each film's release (Participant 2010). These campaigns are implemented through partnerships with non-government, non-profit organisations, and community groups

[38] It should be noted that many of these releases were produced in partnerships with other production studios.

to promote action and education on the issues addressed in each film. For example, their 2009 film, *The Soloist*, starring Jamie Foxx and Robert Downey Jnr., was accompanied by campaigns to raise public awareness about mental health and homelessness (TakePart 2010). The political agenda of these films is thus made explicit and they use a range of media to promote their campaigns – from the films themselves, accompanying websites that link to a range of different projects, to interviews and promotional material that appears in coverage surrounding the films.

While more study would be needed to assess both the characteristics and success of Participant Media's films, we can see a political and commercial approach to film-making that mirrors many of the strategies employed by popular political documentaries. The approach is characterised by a strong engagement with popular culture and a desire to engage other media across a range of platforms, while promoting a particular political agenda. It would seem that the particular blend of politics and popularity at work in the documentaries discussed throughout this thesis has gone travelling. Indeed, it would be worth investigating how other genres besides the documentary fare in exerting a magnetic pull on other media, while engaging the formal world of politics.

In Australia, another potential case of magnetic media worth pondering would be the 2009 film, *Balibo*. The film stars well-known Australian actor Anthony LaPaglia alongside young American actor Oscar Isaac. The film recreates the controversial events of 1975 when five Australian-based journalists and camera-men were killed during the Indonesian invasion of East Timor. The incident has smouldered in Australian popular and political memory for decades, with accusations that the men

were murdered by the Indonesian military and both Australian and Indonesian governments were complicit in covering-up the incident.

The film premiered at the Melbourne International Film Festival, with East Timorese president, Jose Ramos Horta (who is played in the film by Isaac) and Hollywood director Quentin Tarantino among the audience. It was promoted as part-thriller, mystery and drama, captured in the tagline: "East Timor 1975: Five journalists are missing. One man searches for the truth. One man fights for justice" (*IMDb* 2010). The film – shot with a distinct documentary-style – prompted headlines in Australia, where it became a focal point for calls for a new inquiry into the incident. In fact, less than a month after the film's general release in Australia, the Australian Federal Police announced it was launching a new investigation (*ABC* 2009). The film also attracted attention over concerns about its impact on Australia's relations with Indonesia, where the film was banned (Sihaloho & Prameswari 2009).

The above examples represent further products of a "counter-cultural marketplace" (McNair 2006) that exploits the opportunities provided by the contemporary media system to advance oppositional political messages. Alongside popular political documentaries, these examples represent new modes of political communication characterised by a strong engagement with popular culture, an affiliation with commercial networks of production and distribution and a unique capacity to attract and interact with other media, particularly the news. As seen with popular political documentaries, it is these interactions which ultimately characterise the way these popular political texts contribute to public knowledge. These interactions can expand the range of possible meanings circulating around a text, they can facilitate the

transfer of a text across different cultural spaces, linking the worlds of entertainment with those of the political; and they can both further and undermine the text's political influence. On a broader level, these interactions highlight the relationships between different communicative spaces within the public sphere, while pointing to the perils and opportunities that exist for those who seek to use popular media for political advocacy. Future studies of popular political media would thus do well to make this concept of interaction a central focus.

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APPENDIX 2

*International Box Office Figures for Documentaries**

Film	Gross	Year
Fahrenheit 9/11	$222,446,882	2004
March of the Penguins	$127,392,193	2005
Earth	$108,956,910	2009
Oceans	$73,819,434	2010
Bowling for Columbine	$58,008,423	2002
An Inconvenient Truth	$49,756,507	2006
Sicko	$36,055,165	2007
Travelling Birds	$32,257,753	2003
Madonna: Truth or Dare	$29,012,935	1991
Super Size Me	$20,641,054	2004
Capitalism: A Love Story	$17,436,509	2009

Source: *Box Office Mojo*

(http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=documentary.htm)

* correct as at 20 May 2010; excludes concert documentaries and iMax films